University of Hull

Student Councils and the Delivery of Equality, Quality, Partnership, Pluralism and Accountability in Cork Post Primary Schools.

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<u>Abstract</u>

The following study is based on the hypothesis that the setting up of student councils in second level schools in Cork will support the *key considerations* of quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability as set out in the government White Paper on Education, 1995.

To provide a general background to the research, the study starts by reviewing, in chapter one, the state of education in Ireland to-day. This will include a brief look at student councils in other countries e.g. the USA, England, Canada and Norway. The study will chronicle the path of the recent Irish Education Act from Green Paper to White Paper to Education Bill to Education Act in 1998.

The second chapter will examine the literature on student councils in Ireland to date. It will then review the literature on the five key considerations of quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability and state how the setting up of a student council might support these.

Chapter three will outline the research methods of the study. A questionnaire will be created, the first part of which will seek information regarding the present position of student councils in Cork second level schools. The second part of the questionnaire will solicit the respondents' perceptions as to whether a student council can help to deliver these principles and whether the present student councils are actually delivering within the schools. All second level schools in Cork will be asked to participate. The questionnaire will be directed at the teacher co-ordinator of the student councils. In the schools where there is no student council, the deputy principal will be asked to complete the survey. A second questionnaire will be assembled to solicit the perceptions of the students regarding the work of the councils.

Chapter four will chronicle the administration of the survey and present its findings. Conclusions will be drawn and stated.

Chapter five will discuss the findings of the research and present recommendations that will point the way forward for the Department for Education and Science, teachers and students.

Chapter 1

1.1 Purpose of this Study.

The reforms currently being introduced into Irish education inevitably affect every level of the system. The changing style of school management is the result of changing styles of management in the commercial world. This is then reflected in a changing approach to student participation in the theories of empowerment and participation. It also reflects the concerns of democratic governments for the continuance, understanding and implementation of democratic principles. This is seen as vital in order to combat the electoral apathy much in evidence throughout the Western world. Governments are also concerned with the lack of personal responsibility assumed by the average citizen. The rising levels of vandalism and crime show this. A general move away from established religion also plays its part in the loss of a value system to which the majority of the citizens in this country subscribe.

It is in response to all these and other societal changes that there is a search under way to find ways to empower students, to encourage them to take on a greater level of personal responsibility and "to participate fully as citizens in society" (Ireland, 1998A. p3).

The inclusion of student councils in the Education Act must be seen as part of this global attempt to involve and empower its citizens. This study will assemble information, voice opinions and state augments that will clarify the situation. It will do this by a survey to review the present situation, a literature review to establish the principles behind the movement and point the way forward with recommendations.

1.2 The Irish Education System.

a) Introduction

The Irish education system is a centralised system. The Department of Education and Science, which was set up in 1925, is responsible for its administration. Its complexity reflects anhistorical tradition in which education was a pivotal issue of both political and denominational concern. It is predominantly a state-aided system. It is also predominantly Christian but is making available support for the emerging movement of multi-denominational schools. The compulsory school attendance age is between six and sixteen. The mission statement of the Department is

> to ensure the provision of a comprehensive, cost-effective and
> accessible education system of the highest quality, as measured
> by international standards, which will:
> - enable individuals to develop to their full potential as persons
> - to participate fully as citizens in society and
> - to contribute to social and economic development.
> (Ireland, 1998A, p.3).

Education is divided into three sections, primary, second level and third level. Altogether there are 370,000 students attending 768 schools (Ireland, 1998A). This is a six-fold increase in the last thirty years. This study is particularly interested in second level education that is further divided into junior and senior cycles.

b) Junior Cycle

The junior cycle consists of a three-year period of study, culminating in the Junior Certificate examination. This examination was introduced in 1989 to replace the Intermediate and Group Certificate Examinations that had been in place since the last century. It caters for the twelve to fifteen-year age group. Besides preparing students for the examination, the junior cycle hopes also to

> contribute to the moral and spiritual development of the students,
> and encourage them to develop qualities of responsible citizenship
> in a national, European and global context.
> (Ireland, 1998A. p16).

The junior certificate programme provides a wide range of subjects from which the students choose a number for examination purposes. The more usual number is approximately ten. The choice of subjects includes all areas of development. The curriculum is based on the principles of breath and balance, relevance, quality, continuity and progression and coherence (Ireland, 1995).

In 1996, the Junior Certificate Elementary Programme was introduced. This was to certify the achievements of those students who experienced difficulty with or were unlikely to sit the Junior Certificate examination(NCCA, 1994). It does this by providing a curriculum framework that will facilitate schools and teachers in adopting a student-centred approach to the examination. It sets out to make the experience of school relevant and accessible to those students who find it difficult to cope with the education system and who would benefit from special support while working towards the Junior Certificate examination. The programme adopts a cross-curricular approach to work. It concentrates on basic skills and on personal and social development. It employs an activity centred methodology that is interactive, purposeful, relevant, systematic and structured (NCCA, 1994). The programme is still in the piloting stage and is not yet available nationally.

c) Senior Cycle.

In the senior cycle a student may choose a two-year or a three-year period of study. Both courses of study culminate in a Leaving Certificate examination. The curriculum for the senior cycle is undergoing reform at present. These reforms are characterised by three objectives

- holistic development of young people at senior cycle through, for example, the development of autonomous learning, of activity-based learning and of creativity and enterprise;
- educational provision for an increasingly diverse range of student aptitude, aspiration and interest and the recognition of a variety of forms of intelligence and achievement;
- provision of programmes and courses which respond to the perceived needs of Irish society, notably in the area of vocational education, and which satisfy the requirements of equity and social justice.

(Granville, 1996. p.13)

Education System in Ireland

Typical Ages

	Legend
	pre-primary education (ISCED 0)
	primary education (ISCED 1)
	Junior Cycle of secondary level (ISCED 2)
	Senior Cycle of secondary level (ISCED 3)
	Further Education and post-second level courses (ISCED 3)
	Third Level Certificate/Diploma courses (ISCED 5)
	University degree including postgraduate diploma (ISCED 6)
	Postgraduate university degree (ISCED 7)

23/24   VII

22/23   VI

21/22   V

  IV

Doctorate

Master

Master

Post Graduate Degrees

20/21   IV   Bachelor Degree/Post Graduate/Diploma   Bachelor Degree

19/20   III   Bachelor Degree   National Diploma

18/19   II   Universities (including   National Certificate

17/18   I   Teacher Training)   Technical Colleges and D.I.T.

Private Third Level   Bachelor Degree   Diploma/Certificate

19/20, 18/19, 17/18

Post Leaving Courses

Apprenticeship Training (FAS, CERT, TEAGASC)

Private Business Schools

Third Level

Second Level

Senior Cycle

17/18   Leaving Cert   Leaving Cert   Leaving Cert

16/17   XI-XII   Voluntary   XI-XII   Community & Comprehensive   XI-XII   Vocational

15/16   X   Secondary Schools   X   Schools   X   Schools

Transition Year

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Junior Cycle

15/16   Junior Cert   Junior Cert   Junior Cert

14/15   IX   Voluntary   Community &   Vocational

13/14   VIII   Secondary Schools   Comprehensive   Schools

12/13   VII   Schools

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Compulsory Schooling

12/13
11/12
10/11
9/10
8/9
7/8
6/7
5/6   Senior Infants
4/5   Junior Infants

Pre Primary

NATIONAL SCHOOLS   PRIVATE SCHOOLS   SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Main inside flows →   Main outflows ▲   Year of Study   Part-time Education

Note that Infant classes correspond to Pre-Primary level in the International Standard Classification of Education.

Figure 1; Irish Education System. (Source: Ireland, 1998A, p.32)

While the course of study for the Leaving Certificate examination is a two-year course,

these students may, and often do, opt to take an additional year of study called the

Transition Year. The students who will sit the Leaving Certificate Vocational

examination may also take this optional extra year. The students sitting the Leaving

Certificate Applied examination usually follow a two-year senior cycle. Generally they

are the less academic students who are anxious to join the workforce as soon as

possible. The Department of Education set itself the target of retaining in education, up

to Leaving Certificate level, 90% of the students by the year 2000 (Ireland, 1998A,

p16). This target has not been reached.

d) Transition Year.

This one year optional course of study is offered by most schools following the Junior

Certificate examination. The aims of the programme are interrelated and

interdependent. They are

- education for maturity with the emphasis on personal development including social awareness and increased social competence.
- The promotion of general, technical and academic skills with an emphasis on interdisciplinary and self-directed learning.
- Education through experience of adult and working life as a basis for personal development and maturity.

(Ireland, 1994, p.4)

There is no prescribed course for the Transition Year. One of its major strengths is that

each school has the opportunity to design a programme to meet the needs of its own

students. The content of the course, while not excluding the Leaving Certificate course,

is chosen to augment the Leaving Certificate experience. It is a year in which the

students are exposed to and encouraged to explore courses on the fringes of the more

traditional subjects studied for the examinations. Many areas of development are

catered for and the students are constantly encouraged to appraise their own methods of

study and commitment to achievement. They are taught to review their progress, to set

targets and to evaluate their performance (Ireland, 1994). The student is also helped to

explore possible areas of career choice and to become acquainted with the requirements of the colleges for that course of study. Time is also given to the spiritual and aesthetic development of the students. Drama, Art, Media studies and Music are all explored during Transition Year. It is a valuable opportunity to widen the sights and experiences of the students in an examination free year. The methodologies employed cover a wide range, e.g. negotiated learning, personal responsibility in learning, activity-based learning, group learning, project work and research, study visits and field trips, work experience, work simulation and community service. The course was specifically designed by the Department of Education to cater for students who require maturation through education. From experience, schools have found that this extra year does, in fact, give the student the opportunity to mature without the pressures and constraints which are synonymous with structured examination programmes and so indirectly gives the student an advantage in the competition for points in the Leaving Certificate examination.

e) The Leaving Certificate Examination.

This examination is now referred to as the "traditional" or "established" Leaving Certificate to distinguish it from the newer forms of the examination. It has been on offer to students since the last century. The syllabi have been broadened and overhauled and brought up to date. This process is still in progress. It is the terminal examination of the Irish second level system. This course of study is   academic in nature and is followed by those students wishing to progress directly on to third level/degree courses. The students must take at least five subjects including Irish (There are thirty-six recognised subjects for the examination). Entry to third level education is judged on the results in this examination. The absolute even-handedness and transparency of the system is of crucial importance in Irish society. It is considered,

after lengthy review (Ireland, 1999) to be fair, objective and the most efficient way to choose the students who will follow the over-subscribed third level courses.

f) The Leaving Certificate Vocational Examination.

The Leaving Certificate Vocational programme aims to combine elements of the traditional Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied. It was designed to foster in students a spirit of enterprise and initiative. It was designed to offer the student a balance between the established Leaving Certificate and the need to develop the skills and qualities needed in the workplace. It concentrates on technical subjects along with three link modules, vocational in nature. They are entitled Enterprise Education, Preparation for Work and Work Experience. This examination was first introduced in 1989 and broadened in 1994. Students sitting the Leaving Certificate Vocational examination sit five "traditional" subjects, a European language and the three mandatory Link Modules.

g) The Leaving Certificate Applied Examination.

The Leaving Certificate Applied programme offers an alternative education experience to students. This course of study, culminating in a Leaving Certificate, was introduced in response to the broadening of the diversity, abilities and aspirations of students who flooded into the second level schools when free second level education was introduced in 1967. It hopes not only to retain students in the education system but also to prepare them for life in a rapidly changing society while providing some level of vocational training.

The Leaving Certificate Applied programme opens up a whole new world of options for many students. It is different to the established Leaving Certificate in both its focus and its structure. Those students who, at present, do not want to go on to third level education follow the programme. It is a two-year course. It replaced the Senior Certificate and Vocational and Training Programme. It employs a cross-curricular

approach to the traditional school subjects. Its aim is to prepare students for adult life and the world of work. It is organised as a group of modules that are viewed under three headings, General Education, Vocational Education and Vocational Preparation. It sets the students tasks which demand that they make links across the various courses they have taken, that they combine their experience and learning in these courses and that they apply their experience and learning to the task in hand. It purports to promote personal and communication skills, initiative and enterprise, teamwork and high achievement. It also prepares young people for adult and working life. It helps them to develop strategies for decision making.

A 90% attendance at school is required before the student may sit the examination. The examination centres around 100 credits that the student may earn. Two-thirds of these credits can be gained during the two years of the programme and the remaining third at the final examinations. This format enables assessment to take place at regular intervals and gives the student achievable goals. It allows for the accumulation of credits and a steadily developing pattern of rewards. By this means the programme encourages them to remain on at school and to complete the course by sitting the final examination.

h) Conclusion

Second level education in Ireland offers students a five/six year programme. There is a national curriculum for the first three years and the last two, with a school-based programme for the intervening transition year. There are two state examinations, the Junior Certificate examination and the Leaving Certificate examination in its three forms. The education is broad, deliberately avoiding an early specialisation by students. The widespread reforms of the last decades, both structural and curricular, have endeavoured to produce a rounded, confident, articulate and responsible graduate. With the increased and more accurate knowledge of how students learn and of the methodologies which will most effectively motivate them, there is in evidence at

present, a widespread movement to involve the students more in their own learning and so to empower and encourage them to take on greater personal responsibility. This movement encompasses the introduction of student councils. But first it is necessary to distinguish between the different types of second level school available in Ireland today.

1.3 Types of Second Level School

a) Introduction

Traditionally there were two types of second level school in Ireland, the secondary school and the vocational school. The secondary school was usually privately owned, fee paying and academic in its curriculum. The students sat the Intermediate and the Leaving Certificate examinations. The vocational school was free. Its curriculum was vocational in nature. It provided a two-year course culminating in the Group Certificate examination. The local vocational education committee ran it. These schools were sometimes called technical schools.

b) Comprehensive Schools

The scene began to change in the 1960's. The upturn in the economy at the time encouraged more students to seek education and the Lemass government was looking to education to provide a skilled workforce to fill the new industries. The vocational schools began to cater for the academic curriculum necessary to sit the Intermediate and the Leaving Certificate examinations and the secondary schools began to cater for the practical subjects like woodwork and metalwork as these were introduced as examination subjects in the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations. Add to this the increased number seeking second level education and the government, when building a new school, saw the logic in combining the two previous types of education. This new type of school was called a comprehensive school.

The sixties were also the years when equality of opportunity was being advocated. By combining the prestigious, academic education of the secondary school and the "lesser" education of the "techs" the government was taking a step towards eliminating inequality. The first comprehensive school was opened in 1966. By 1970 there were fifteen comprehensive schools in Ireland. These schools, unlike the religious voluntary secondary schools, were built and owned by the government. They were also, mainly, co-educational.

c) Community Schools

The comprehensive schools' development led on to the community school. In educational aims and provision they are the same but the community school had an added dimension. It was to provide for the local community. It would do this by providing evening classes, playing fields, meeting rooms etc. for the local community. The plan was that the two greatest providers of second level education, the religious orders and the vocational education committees, would combine together in partnership. Following the success of the community schools for the Department of Education the vocational education committee wanted to set up their own community schools. These become known as community colleges. They offer the same education and facilities as the community schools but they differ in management structure.

d) Voluntary Secondary Schools

The Churches in Ireland have been deeply involved in the provision of education and most of their schools are denominational and single sexed. Historically the secondary school was founded by a religious order. It was fee paying and so maintained a certain exclusivity. It was also very academic in its curriculum. In 1967 the then Minister of Education, Donogh O'Malley, announced that second level education was to be free to all students. The religious owned schools were given the option of joining this system and providing free education or remaining outside the system and continuing to charge

fees. If they opted to join the system the schools would get a grant in lieu of student fees. Over 90% of secondary schools joined the system. This doubled the number of students attending secondary schools by 1970.

e) Vocational Schools

The 1937 Vocational Education Act provided for the setting up of the vocational or technical schools. These provided a two-year, practical education, free. The students were often in apprenticeships and attended the school part time. There was a strong social class linkage in the pattern of pupil participation in the different types of school. The education the vocational schools provided was considered "inferior" in a society divided by social class. With the increased interest in equality of opportunity in the sixties, the vocational schools began to cater for the more academic curriculum which led to the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations and so the lines of demarcation between the different types of school became blurred.

f) Conclusion

The voluntary secondary schools cater for 62% of the school going population, the vocational and community colleges for 25% and the community and comprehensive schools for the remaining 13% (Ireland, 1998A).

The Intermediate and Group Certificate examinations have been replaced by the Junior Certificate examination(1992). The system is undergoing rationalisation with many amalgamations completed or in the pipeline. The religious, owing to lack of numbers, are reducing their role in education while attempting to safeguard their ethos within the schools.

Number of Second-Level Schools 1995/96
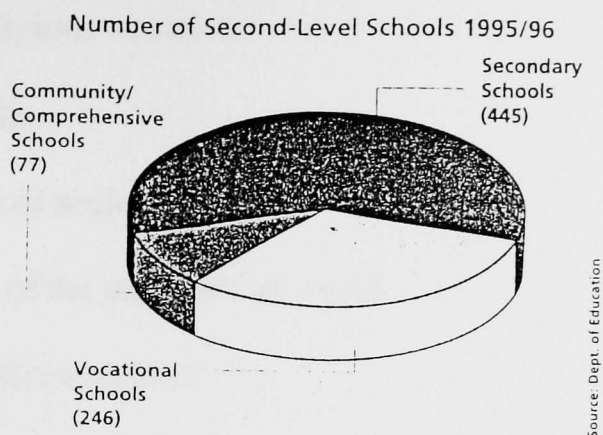
Figure 2, Number of Second Level Schools. (Source; Ireland, 1998A, p15)

1.4 Changing Styles of Management in Education.

a) Introduction

Put very simply the old style of management in second level schools in Ireland was, traditionally, authoritarian. It was a pyramid shaped model of management. The new style, gradually being adopted, is participatory. Its shape would be more horizontal. School management in Ireland is in a state of transition from the old to the new. The process of change can be traced as far back as the sixties when a declining and ageing population pattern changed rapidly into the youngest and fastest-growing population in Western Europe (Farrell, B. 1998. p. ix). Coinciding with that was the fundamental shift in the locus and status of authority that was noticeable in Irish society after Vatican II. This effected every level and area of life in Ireland. Education was central to this set of societal changes. Although started in the sixties, at that time and for some time afterwards, the energy of school management was absorbed in coping with radical changes in numbers, e.g. providing classrooms and teachers. Over the last fifteen years the emphasis has moved from fire-brigade action to the management of change that aspires to be accountable, transparent and collaborative.

The influences that started the change and have kept it moving could be categorised under the following headings,

i) Drop in religious vocations

ii) Falling rolls

iii) Demands of society

iv) Intrusion of the commercial world

v) School "effectiveness"

vi) The concept of leadership

vii) Staff demands.

A brief background to each will further clarify the situation.

b) Drop in Religious Vocations.

Vatican II, which met in the sixties, had profound effects on life in Ireland and particularly those living in a religious order. Many of the restrictions and limitations which one espoused on entering were lifted. The vows taken, the habit worn, the company kept, the communication with lay people, all changed. To use a modern term "the goal posts shifted". This was an attempt by the authorities to bring the religious orders into the twentieth century. What it did do, very effectively, was to blur the lines of demarcation and remove the air of mystery which lent authority to the religious. There is no doubt that vocations were already falling before Vatican II but the move to open the religious houses to the influences of the world, accelerated the decline in vocations. No longer was it socially enhancing to enter into religious life. Also the security previously granted to religious was no longer guaranteed. Many long-term members of the orders questioned their vocations in the light of the new parameters, and some left the orders (Drudy & Lynch. 1993 and Diggins. 1992). This fall in numbers effected the type and quality of service that the religious could offer to education. Prior to this, every religious second level school, the vast majority, had a religious principal, vice principal and many staff members. Also, unofficially, there were always additional personnel in the convent/monastery that could be called on at any time to

help out in the multitude of chores that needed doing. With the drop in vocations the additional personnel were no longer available. Gradually there were fewer religious on the staff. Vice principalships began to be offered to lay people and finally the position of principal was offered to the laity. This is the position in the new century. The religious orders are struggling to protect their ethos in a system fast being taken over by lay personnel.

Obviously this has effected the style of management within second level schooling. The religious carried in their person a respect that was unquestioned in Irish society. This air of respect and authority permeated every facet of school life. With the demise of the religious in the schools that authority has been eroded. No longer is respect granted automatically to the position of teacher or principal. Now it must be earned. Allied to this new need to earn respect is the lack of backup that was always available to the religious. Now the full burden of principalship falls on the shoulders of the principal, be s/he lay or religious. The need to spread the load became evident. There would have to be developed a system of middle management, a career structure for lay teachers that would equip and encourage them to assume responsibilities in school management.

This need for change in the style of management of schools coincided with expansion in the commercial life in Ireland where more young people, especially women, were looking for careers, rather than just jobs, in education.

c) Falling Rolls.

After the initial expansion in numbers attending second level education, which reached its peak in the early eighties, the numbers attending has been gradually falling. This has resulted in schools competing for the pupils. Schools, which previously selected their intake, are now grateful for all new enrolments. This, in turn, has caused a cut back in teachers and amalgamation/rationalisation of schools. These events have caused

management to rethink their approach to the management of the schools. Competition between the schools for the available students led to research into the areas of effectiveness of schools. Parents were now looking at the performance of the school before deciding where to send their offspring and management had to "sell" their school to the parents. Parents no longer automatically accepted the authority of the religious and the belief that nothing could beat the nuns/brothers/priests where education was concerned. Therefore, with falling rolls, it was in the interest of the school to adopt a more open style of management that could demonstrate its effectiveness and that parents were making the "right" decision by sending their child there.

d) Demands of Society.

Charting Our Education Future was published in 1995. It was the white paper prior to the Education Act of 1998. In chapter 1 it set out the principles for a philosophical rationale for education policy and practice. The key considerations recommended to underpin the philosophical rationale were quality, equality, pluralism, partnership and accountability. We are concerned here with accountability.

Over the last three decades there was little demand for accountability by the principal of a school to anyone other than the Department of Education and the local bishop, and that was limited. Owing to the general higher level of education of the populace there has grown a demand for accountability by those in authority in all walks of life. This has partly arisen because of the revelations of fraud in areas of public concern. The demand for accountability necessitated a different approach to management in the schools. Boards of management were introduced. There were representatives of both parents and teachers on the boards. There has been much discussion about the composition of the boards, but the overall concept of accountability has been accepted by both the boards themselves and the principal and management within the schools.

Another "buzz" word applied to modern management is transparency. Transparency demands that management can justify any action it takes if, and even before, being required to do so. This entails canvassing opinions and advice, keeping more detailed records and setting out policies for all to see. This is a far cry from the old style of decision-making, which took place behind closed doors and was handed down to the staff, parents and pupils. Accountability and transparency require a new style of principal. The pupils and the parents are demanding to know what is going on in the schools.

e) Intrusion of the Commercial World.

Over the last decade or so the ideas of the commercial world have been applied to that of education. The schools have not been asked to make a profit but they are being asked to give value for money. The state is investing in education and the politicians and the public, whose money it is, want to know how and why it is being spent. The student is looked on as the client and the client can always vote with her/his feet if s/he does not feel satisfied. Just across the water they are producing league tables of school performance. Many have been closed as "failing" schools. Will this come to Ireland? All the signs are that it is only a matter of time. Schools, in the person of the principal, must show that they are giving value for money, that the resources allocated to education will produce a kind of "profit" in that the young people coming out of the schools are well educated and well equipped to fulfil their role as adults in society.
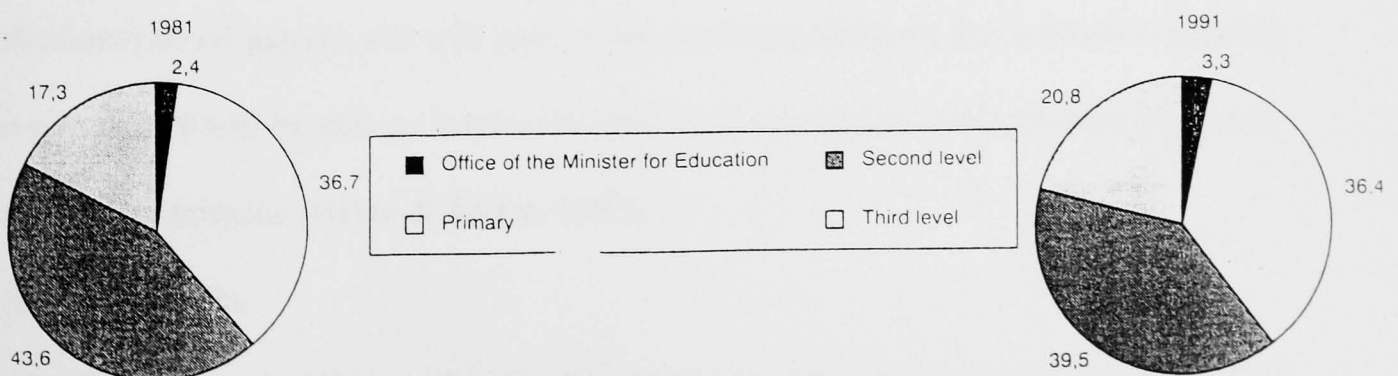
Figure 3, Expenditure on Education. (Source; Coolahan, 1995, p 46)

e) School Effectiveness.

This debate started in America in the sixties when the government commissioned

research into the differences in the outcomes of the various schools (Coleman, 1968 &

Jencks. 1972). At first it was thought that the schools themselves made no difference

but in 1979 Rutter, with his study of London schools (Rutter, 1979) found that the

process variables within the schools had a definite impact on student outcomes. The

debate moved on from there to see exactly what aspects of the school contributed to the

effectiveness of that particular school (Sergiovanni, 1996). The findings recorded that

the style of leadership within the school was greatly influential in the effectiveness of

the school. The principal needed to give strong leadership. Part of that leadership was

to share tasks and decisions with staff, parents and students (Leader & Boldt, 1994).

This was referred to as participatory management.

g) The Concept of Leadership.

Earlier ideas on what constituted a good leader involved one strong personality, in a

position of authority, who told the rest of the staff what to do. The person derived

his/her authority from his/her position, not from personal qualifications. Many of the

"old" principals had no professional qualification for the job (Drudy & Lynch. 1993).

New research into the qualities of good leadership denounces this style of leadership.

They claim that a good leader will share decision making, will encourage and empower

the staff, will delegate authority, will provide the resources for personal and

professional development and will have a strong vision of where the institution is going.

The new leader will be able to inspire the staff with this vision and lead them in pursuit

of a common purpose (Blaze & Kirby, 1992).

h) Staff Demands.

The staff, too, has played its part in the development of the new style of principal. With

the lack of vocations to the religious life, opportunities for promotion which were

denied to our predecessors have opened for teachers. Also the new principal does not have the backup of endless personnel in the convent/monastery to help out with the myriad of tasks that need to be done. S/he must now rely on her/his staff to take on the extra work. This necessitated the creation of a middle management. Prior to this the posts of responsibility were awarded strictly on seniority. This did not produce the best person for the job. In effect, it often gave extra work and responsibilities to those approaching retirement. The result of this was that those given the posts of responsibilities did not feel an obligation to do extra work. After all, they were going to get the job anyway and it would be theirs until they retired. By negotiating with the unions, a new system of promotion was introduced. It will take many years for the old system to die out but, at least, the change has started. Staff is demanding to be involved in the decision-making process within the school. They are actively enhancing their professional qualifications in preparation for assuming those responsibilities (Kavanagh, 1993).

i) Conclusion

For the reasons cited above and other associated reasons, there has been, over the last two/three decades a gradual change in the style of management employed and accepted within the second level system of education. Many schools are still in the process of change and both management and staff are experiencing difficulties in implementing and accepting the whole new mindset that underpins these changes. All, however, are agreed that the changes are coming and that, in the long term, they will benefit education. Schools, which have enthusiastically embraced the new approach, display an air of collegiality, empowerment and partnership that permeates every avenue of school life (Kavanagh, 1993).

It follows from this, that if the staff benefit from the new style of management, why are these benefits not passed on to the pupils? Would they not respond to delegation, to

empowerment, to being encouraged to take on further responsibilities? Should we not

be in partnership with the students? For too long education has been something that

teachers do "to" pupils. It is time we looked at the possibilities of working "with" the

pupils.

1.4   The Education Act 1998

a) Introduction

Prior to 1998, Ireland lacked an up-to-date legislative framework in keeping with the

needs of an educational system which has altered fundamentally in recent decades

(Kavanagh, 1993). It has taken almost two decades for the Act to be passed by the Dáil,

if we accept that it was during the tenure of Gemma Hussey as Minister for Education

that the process started.   A brief look at that journey is relevant to this study.

From the first Education Minister - Eoin MacNeill (1922-1925), up to and including

Mícheál Martin, twenty-eight ministers have held the education portfolio, giving an

average tenure of less than three years per minister.   According to Kavanagh

> conservatism and caution have characterised the educational stance
> of most ministers down through the years.
> (Kavanagh, A., 1993. p.86)

Kavanagh goes on to explain that

> increasingly, the Department of Education has been pushed into a
> holding position and so, very little educational leadership has been
> forthcoming from that source.
> (Kavanagh,A. 1993. p.86)

This opinion was upheld by the OECD Report (1991), which stated that

> Despite the masterly inactivity of ministers in the past, the Department
> seldom sought to acquire a policy-making or even a major advisory role.
> The main reason for this is that it has never questioned the doctrine of
> ministerial responsibility.
> (OECD 1991. pp.40-41)

The rapid expansion that followed O'Malley's introduction of free second level

education occupied the energies of the department for the seventies, along with the

introduction of the new curriculum for primary schools. It was not until the eighties

that a serious look was taken at second level education.

In 1980, the then minister, Gemma Hussey, published a white paper, entitled "*White*

Paper on Educational Development". Reform of the education system was put before

the Dáil in 1984 as *The Programme for Action in Education*. The Minister was

attempting to get Irish education to move into the twentieth century. She wished to

change the classical orientation of the curriculum to one that would

> reflect the intellectual, social, cultural and economic needs and provide
> for the personal development of individual pupils.
>
> (Ireland. 1980. p.6)

Gemma Hussey set the ball rolling. The new Junior Certificate examination was set in

motion in 1989, with the first students sitting the examination in 1992. For the first

time in the history of second level education in Ireland the curriculum was being

situated within a framework of aims and principles. These principles were to be

characterised by "breadth, balance, relevancy and differentiation" (Ireland, 1984). This

movement towards reform produced the Green Paper of 1992. Further changes in

education policy and practice over the last decade have been characterised increasingly

by an intensive process of consultation between the Minister and the Department of

Education and the partners in education. This has encouraged a positive approach to the

new initiatives.

b) The Green Paper.

In June 1992, Séamus Brennan, Minister for Education, published the Green Paper on

Education, entitled *Education for a Changing World*. In the foreword to the paper he

spoke about a" radical reappraisal of traditional approaches to education policies". He

hoped that the paper would initiate widespread debate and promised that, after a period

of about six months for consultation and debate the government would prepare a White

Paper.

The Green Paper set itself six aims;

1. To establish greater equity in education

2. To broaden Irish education

3. To make the best use of education resources

4. To train and develop teachers so as to equip them for a

    constantly changing environment

5. To create a system of effective quality assurance

6. To ensure greater openness and accountability and maximise

    parent involvement.

(Ireland. 1992 p.5)

It emphasised that this was a discussion document. The purpose of the Green Paper was

to give a structure to the debate. There were almost 1,000 written submissions lodged

with the Department of Education in response to the Green Paper. The Minister and the

Department took note of the responses and altered some of the proposals of the paper in

the light of the submissions. The very first task was to reach a consensus on the general

aims of education. The Green Paper set out a statement of educational aims, which was

later broadly endorsed in the responses to the Paper. However it was felt that these aims

did not follow through to inform other areas of the Paper (Coolahan, 1994). The

absence of an encompassing philosophy of education was also noted. Where there was

reference to a philosophy it was felt to over-emphasise utilitarian and individualist

values and to place too much stress on enterprise, technology and economic concerns

with an under-emphasis on cultural, moral, artistic and civic elements.

There was tremendous interest in the Green Paper, reflecting the respect given to

education in the country. Kavanagh states that the Green Paper was

> the first serious attempt since the foundation of the state, to review the
> state of education

(Kavanagh, A. 1993. p.98)

These sentiments were repeated when Coolahan said

> The Green Paper of 1992 sets out the first major comprehensive
> agenda for educational change since independence, with the intention
> of comprehensive educational legislation to follow.
>
> (Coolahan, J. 1995. p.21)

Central objectives such as equity, quality, partnership, accountability, efficiency, devolution, autonomy, collegiality, innovation, recur throughout the Green Paper. There followed much lively debate that culminated in the Education Convention of 1993. This convention crystallised areas of consensus and disagreement among the interest groups. Coolahan said of the convention that it was "an unprecedented, democratic event in the history of Irish education" (Coolahan, J. 1994. p1). He went on to remark that

> It brought together representatives from forty two organisations to engage
> in structured and sustained discussion on key issues of educational policy in
> Ireland.
>
> (Coolahan, J. 1994. p.1).

The convention did not set out to produce a comprehensive report on the Irish education system. Its brief from the minister was to concentrate on areas where divergent views seemed to exist within mainstream education and to explore possibilities of more agreement (Coolahan, 1994). They planned to focus on key issues, to analyse and clarify these issues, to promote understanding of varying perspectives and to provide further guidance to the Department of Education in relation to policy formulation. The discussions of the convention were carried out in a spirit of openness and partnership. They continued for nine days. The convention generated a spirit of enthusiasm that was carried forward into the publication of the White Paper in 1995.

c) The White Paper, 1995.

The White Paper, entitled *Charting Our Education Future*, represented the most comprehensive document on education since the founding of the State. In many respects, it was a compendium of ideas and proposals on policies for development. It

brought together ideas from many sources and sought to put them together in a single comprehensive document (Ireland, 1995).

There are seven sections to the White Paper. They are:

1) Philosophical framework

2) Provision of education

3) The teaching profession

4) Parents

5) New organisational arrangements

6) International dimension

7) Legal framework.

The first section of the paper, the philosophical framework, covered two important issues. It identified the core concerns of the State as those of pluralism, equality, partnership, quality and accountability. It coupled these with fundamental human and civil rights and the promotion of social and economic well being. The second issue was the rights of individual institutions to develop and give effect to their own ethos and philosophical approach to education.

The second section dealt with the provision of education to primary, secondary, third level, further education and youth and sport activities. Part three was concerned with the teaching profession. Besides suggesting changes to the training of teachers the Paper wished to set up a statutory teaching council and a welfare service for teachers. Part four looked at the expanding role of parents in the education of their children. They would have a statutory right to be represented on the boards of management of the schools and to have a parents' council attached to each school. The new organisational arrangements suggested in part five included the setting up of Education Boards on a regional basis and devolving much power from the Department of Education to these boards. Parts six and seven dealt with the international and legal dimension of

education. Ireland, it stated, as an island, must develop her links with the rest of the

world especially with Europe. Legislation focussed on the setting out of functions and

responsibilities at the different organisational levels. It aspired to be enabling rather

than prescriptive so as to allow for flexibility.

In her introduction to the White Paper, Niamh Bhreatnach, the Minister for Education in

1995, stated that the level of discussion

> involved, for the first time, structured multi-lateral dialogue among
> all the   major partners in education on crucial issues affecting the
> development of education.
> (Ireland. 1995. p.ix)

She goes on to *assure* us that

> It seeks to give an empowering sense of direction to all of the partners
> in education.
> (Ireland, 1995, p.ix)

And she promises that

> Changes will continue to be implemented on a partnership basis,
> involving consultation with all the concerned interests where this is
> necessary and appropriate.
> (Ireland. 1995. p.x)

The theme of partnership is strongly emphasised throughout the Minister's speech and it

is reiterated, where appropriate, throughout the whole document. This aspect of the

White Paper is strongly supported by CORI when they speak about "democratic

processes" and "participatory democracy"(McCormack & Archer. 1995. pp35-41).

They asked whether the words would be translated into action when the White Paper

became law. CORI went on to argue

> that the participation in decision making is itself educational and helps
> bring about a strengthening sense of social solidarity and citizenship.
> (McCormack & Archer. 1995. p.35)

This leads us to the most relevant part of the White Paper as far as this research is

concerned. Tucked away on page 163 there is one very important sentence which states

> In order to facilitate this consultation, **the board of management of each
> second-level school will be encouraged to promote the formation of a
> students' council**, which will work in collaboration with the staff and the
> parents' association.   (Ireland. 1995. p.163)

This comes under the broad heading of "The Role of Schools in Promoting the Social, Personal and Health Education of Students." It is further listed under "Relationships within the school". It reflects the government reaction to the criticism that the Green Paper under emphasised the non-academic side of education and also attempts to carry through the idea of partnership to include students. The White Paper takes a holistic approach to education and the preparation of students not just to fulfil their role in the economic development of the country but to partake fully in their role as committed citizens. For the first time the notion of giving a voice to students in the affairs of the school is put forward.

As promised, much public discussion followed the publication of the White Paper. Again submissions were invited and given due consideration. The most controversial suggestion in the White Paper was the one regarding the setting up of the regional boards. If this did happen, what would be the position of the vocational education committees? The sentence regarding the students' councils hardly raised an eyebrow. In schools where participatory management was becoming a reality, the idea that the students, too, might have something worthwhile to contribute, was accepted without argument and some second level schools went ahead and set up a student council.

d) The Education Act 1998.

The Education Bill was published in December 1997. It sought to achieve the important objectives of placing the education system on a statutory footing and acknowledging and strengthening the involvement of the partners - parents, patrons, students, teachers and the state. For the first time students were listed among the partners in education. One year later the Dáil passed the Education Act. It is made up of nine parts dealing with;

      1) Preliminary and General

2) Schools

3) The Inspectorate

4) Boards of Management

5) The Principal and Teachers

6) Miscellaneous

7) National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

8) Examinations

9) Bodies Corporate.

The title of each part is self-explanatory. The only surprise in the Act was that it left out the setting up of the regional boards. This was as a result of the strong lobby for the vocational education committees.

What concerns us here is the further development of the idea of students' councils. This appeared in part 6, "Miscellaneous", under the heading of "Information to students and student councils." The whole idea is expanded (full text in appendix 1). It places the responsibility for setting up a student council on the board of management of the school. The use of the word "shall" in an Act gives the sentence obligatory status. It states that

> A board shall establish and maintain procedures for the purposes of
> informing students in a school of the activities of the school.
> (Ireland. 1998. p.26)

The Act gives control of the councils to the board as they are instructed to draw up the rules for the establishment of the student council and may at any time dissolve them.

The purpose of the student council is also set out;

> A student council shall promote the interests of the school and the
> involvement of students in the affairs of the school, in co-operation
> with the board, parents and teachers.
> (Ireland. 1995. p.26)

The Act promises that the Department will publish guidelines to schools.

This section of the Education Act has caused much stress in schools that have not adopted a collaborative style of management (Monahan, 1999). In schools "on the

move" the act has been welcomed and these schools were well along the road of implementing it before it became law.

e) Conclusion

Right through the evolution of the Education Act there has been widespread consultation and this consultation has been reflected in the ensuing documents. This is participatory management in action. The notion of partnership is further developed in each stage until finally, it includes students as partners in the education process. This reflects research findings on cognitive development which hold that students must be given an active role in their own education, that by so doing we are giving responsibility for learning over to the student and the student will respond favourably (Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995). Education is now something we, the teachers, do "with" pupils and not "to" pupils. If it is beneficial to give responsibility for learning to the students, surely they are capable of assuming some responsibility for the running of the school in which they hold the major stake. The characteristics for effective schools cite the giving of responsibility to the students as significant (Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995). The Education Act has set in motion in Ireland an idea that is already functioning well in many other countries.

1.6 Student Councils in other countries.

a) Introduction

Ireland lags behind other countries in the introduction of student councils. While a prefect system is common to many Irish second level schools, there was always a strong element of control by school management(Lynch, 1999). There was often an element of voting by the students for the prefects but the staff chose the candidates and the results of the voting were "ratified by the religious". The prefects were usually high achievers and conformists to school rules and traditions. They were aware of the honour

bestowed on them in being appointed prefects, and although often fulfilling many duties, they had little or no say in the running of their schools.

With the introduction of collaboration, participation and partnership, the new style student council can hope to be more democratic, independent and influential (Trafford, 1997). We, in Ireland, are at the beginning of a journey. Let us take a brief look at other countries that have travelled down this road.

b) The United States of America

In America they have had student councils since the 1930's. There is no obligation on the schools to set one up but virtually all high schools and junior high schools have a student council. Quite a few elementary schools also have a student council.

The movement started in 1930 at the Sapulpa High School in Oklahoma where the principal, E.H. McClune, set up a student council and gave it many responsibilities within the school. McClune went on to host the first meeting of the presidents of student councils in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas and programmes. The president of the Sapulpa High School at the time was a teenager called Warren Shull. Shull went on to organise the first statewide meeting of the student councils. In 1932, at the National Education Association Convention the National Association of Student Government Officers was formally created with Shull as its president. Their first publication, *Student Leader*, was on the market in 1935 and was published monthly. In 1940 the name of the association was changed to the National Association of Student Councils (NASC). By 1943 the association had 200 member schools. This figure increased to 1,900 by 1947 with 20 state associations. NASC collected valuable information on student council practices and reported them through articles and publications. The articles helped to give the student council movement a sense of direction, to explain the reasons for student councils, and to help principals and advisers fit student councils into student activity programmes. By 1963 all fifty states had a

student council association providing such services as leadership workshops and an organisation of statewide student council projects for member schools. There was a lull in the 1970's as the movement suffered from the social and political upheaval that swept through American society during those years. From that time on, the association made it a priority to provide leadership courses and camps for their members. By the 1980's, student-initiated, student-implemented and student-sponsored activities were an integral part of the school's curriculum. 1800 student leaders and their advisers attended the 1999 National Conference, held at Roseville High School. They came from all fifty states, Puerto Rico, Australia and Canada.

NASC has formulated a philosophy that is reflected in its purposes and objectives. The purposes of NASC as set down in their constitution are as follows:

> To promote student participation within the school and its community
> to encourage the development of new student councils
> to assist all student councils in becoming more effective organisations within
> their schools, community, state and nation
> to help organise state associations of student councils
> to provide leadership training for student council members and advisers
> to encourage and support healthy living styles for young people
> to assist student councils to focus on relevant current problems and to
> encourage them to seek solutions to those problems.
> (NASC. 1999. p.1)

This researcher has been in touch with two student council associations in America, those of Maryland (MASC) and California (CASC). Each has a very detailed constitution for their student councils, running to seventeen articles in the case of Maryland. Each article deals with a separate area or function such as the name of the association, purposes, affiliation and association and membership etc. The mission statement of MASC is

> to foster a State-wide environment for all secondary school students
> to express and exchange opinions and ideas, develop leadership skills
> and to promote student representation and involvement in all groups and
> organisations impacting on the lives of students.
> (MASC. 1999. p.1)

The councils at school level are made up of representatives of each class. An executive is elected from the representatives. They have an adult adviser, a teacher or parent.

They meet at least once a week and in some cases every day. There are special student council offices provided within the schools and time given on the timetable for meetings and training. Some of the student councils are confined to purely student activities such as homecoming, dances, rallies and assemblies. Others have broader responsibilities and are involved in school policy issues, curriculum, hiring and the evaluation of teachers. They also make representations to the site councils and school boards. The council is encouraged to hold an annual or semi-annual retreat for planning and teambuilding. They are also encouraged to develop long-term vision, mission statements, goals, objectives and action plans. Most would be involved in community service projects (MASC, 1999).

The role of the adviser varies from school to school. In some, the adviser makes all the decisions and directs the council. In others the advisers are more like facilitators who empower the students. It is the latter role that is encouraged by NASC.

NASC states that staff attitudes have been a problem since the start of the organisation. They are generally apprehensive of, even hostile to, the councils. They say the issue comes up at every adviser training session. It is an ongoing difficulty and not unique to America (Gold, 1994).

In America there is also a Student Leadership Network. It provides advice, publications and leadership programmes to the student councils. Their purpose is to

> provide a unified voice for student councils and student governments in
> middle school and high school around the country.
> (Student Council Network. 1999 p.1)

Their philosophy is that student participation in all schools means that students can and will make positive contributions to school governance, if they are properly prepared and are in an environment that fosters their participation. Their goal is to empower youth and ensure their youth voice is heard. Their mission statement is to create a network of

students who participate in their education while empowering them with the skills to become active citizens.

c) Canada

School councils are a topical issue in Canada at the moment. They are primarily concerned with parental involvement in the decision making process in education but where a high school is involved then there must be at least one student elected to the council. Because this is the only representation that students have in Canada we will look at the debate and where it is now.

The federal government makes legislative and fiscal decisions that impact on the delivery of education at both provincial and local levels and on school boards. The Education Reform Act 1988 contained a "Parent Charter" which provided parents with the right to involvement in their child's school. Prior to this the parents' role was devoted almost exclusively to volunteering, Parent Teacher Associations or Home and School federations. To fulfil the charter a new structure was needed which would lead ultimately, it was hoped, to more effective schools and school improvement. Demographic, social and economic changes in Canada had had a profound impact on the needs of the student and the role of schools, as in the Western world. To meet the diverse needs of the students and to offer the very best educational programme, schools in Canada were becoming more open and responsive. Educators recognised more and more the critical role family and community had in supporting learning. Locally elected boards of education, over 400 nation-wide, ensured local input and control. However, it was felt that intensified efforts and new structures were needed to support direct involvement. The idea of introducing school-based structures was raised. There followed a round of consultation in each province. The introduction of school councils was a priority. Was this the most appropriate way to involve students, parents and

community members in schools? Meetings were held. Submissions were gathered and questionnaires were completed. The end result was the introduction of school councils. A school council was defined as follows;

> A school council is a formally constituted group made up of parents of students attending the school, the principal, teachers, students and community members. The council advises on education matters at the school level.
>
> (School Councils, Alberta. 1999. p.1).

School councils are mandatory for all public schools. They are made up of the principal, at least one teacher, parents of students enrolled in the school and a member of the community who is not a parent. For high schools, they must include at least one student.

The primary purpose of the school councils was to encourage and support parent and community involvement, partnership and communications with schools. They provided a legal, interdependent forum to address concerns for school improvement. Their objectives included;

- to foster co-operation, partnership and shared responsibility among families, communities and schools for the education and well-being of children,

- To strengthen two-way communications, understanding and confidence between schools and family and community members

- to enrich the learning programme and assist in providing a comprehensive range of services to meet diverse student needs.

The school council is a voluntary body that works in close partnership with school staff, students, family and community members. They provide advice about school policies, priorities and issues. Additional responsibilities can be granted by a board of education to permit shared management arrangements where desired. The principal of the school

is responsible for facilitating the formation and operation of the council. Teachers and students have representation on the council as have the local community and parents. The new roles and responsibilities of school councils add up to a substantial involvement in decision making at school level.

This researcher looked in detail at the school councils in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

In Alberta school councils were mandated in legislation. Every school in the province must have one. Their roles and responsibilities are found in the *Alberta School Act*. Many of the councils operate on a "representative model" that must report back to the community two or more times a year. The alternative model is that of "assembly/town hall model" where decisions are made at open meetings of the entire community.

In Saskatchewan the school council is not mandated in legislation and is not required to register with the Minister or the school board. However their duties are mentioned in the *Saskatchewan Education Act*. In Manitoba also the school councils are not mandated. There are the familiar PTA's or Home and School Federations in Manitoba and they may, if they so wish, opt to become a school council. In which case they will register with the Minister's office.

Student councils, as we understand the term, do not exist in Canada.

d) Norway

Student councils are well established in Norway. Norway is a sparsely populated country with 4.3 million inhabitants. In 1889 a seven-year period of compulsory education was introduced. In 1969 this was extended to nine years and in 1996 further extended to ten years, age six to sixteen years. All state education is free. The system is decentralised. A common national standard is ensured by means of legislation, regulations and national curricula. Comprehensive reforms in structure and content are

being implemented and the educational level of the population has risen considerably in recent years.

The school system is based on Christian, humanist and democratic ideals and aims to promote values like tolerance and freedom of thought equal status and equal worth, equality of responsibility and participation in decision making. Each school is run by a principal, assisted by a co-ordinating committee on which are represented the parents, the teachers and the pupils. All school activities are characterised by a democratic approach. The pupils learn co-operation on the one hand and independence and personal responsibility on the other. In their commitment to these aims, time is allotted on the timetable to student and class councils.

Each pupil is given a copy of "*The Guide*". This is a publication by The National Centre for Educational Resources. The first section of the book deals with "the job of learning" and the second with student representation. It emphasises that to be elected as a representative puts one in a position of trust and that even if one is not personally elected one should still know how to benefit from the existence of class and student councils. It explains the mechanics of election to the class council. A further election is held to elect representatives to the school council from those already elected as class representatives. In some schools, work on the student council has been designated an optional subject.

The council decides its own assignments and those of its executive. It deals with matters concerning the pupils.

> It is the forum where all the class representatives discuss how to win
> influence for pupils on matters relating to learning, whether teacher-pupil
> cooperation is good enough and so on. The student council also takes up
> matters relating to the school administration.
> (The National Centre for Educational Resources. 1994. p.39)

Among the other duties of the student council is listed their participation in the adoption of the school plan for the forthcoming academic year. It is the responsibility of the executive of the student council to see that these duties are carried out.

The president of the student council is the head of its student body. S/he represents the pupils in many connections, both at meetings with the school administration and elsewhere. The president's job is to further the interests of the pupils at school and to initiate activities for the benefit of the pupils. The president must chair the meetings of the student council and allocate duties to the members of the executive. S/he will meet the school administration regularly and discuss the running of the school on behalf of the pupils.

> That means that it is important for you to keep yourself informed
> about current school issues. It is important to communicate the views
> of the pupils on how they want their school to be and to contribute
> actively to finding solutions to any problem that may arise.
> (The National Centre for Educational Resources. 1994. p.42)

The Guide goes on to explain the duties of the vice president, the secretary, the treasurer and the other members of the executive. Guidelines are given on running a successful meeting. It is suggested that management should consider training for the members elected. Management is responsible for providing an office to the council, suitable working conditions and allocating regular office hours with a notice board in a position of prominence.

The Guide points out that

> Although they spend large parts of their lives at school, many pupils
> lack a personal relationship to it, to the teachers and often even to
> their fellow pupils.
> (The National Centre for Educational Resources. 1994. p. 44)

It suggests that the student council, with a little imagination, could remedy this situation.

e) England

Student councils have been an informal part of English education for some years (Trafford, 1993). They differed greatly from those in Canada, being made up solely of students with a member of management acting as liaison person between council and staff. They are widely accepted as contributing significantly to higher achievement (Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995) and better discipline (Davies, 1999) in schools. They have recently been subsumed into the new citizenship curriculum. From September 2002, citizenship as a school subject will be compulsory in all second level schools in England (The National Curriculum Citizenship Order, 2002). This Order also applies to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland but it has statutory effect only in England. The citizenship curriculum does not specifically mention or enjoin school councils. However, it states that effective school councils are a very obvious way of fulfilling the requirements. The Department for Education and Employment considers a student council to be an excellent experiential method of teaching the new subject. They state that theoretical knowledge must be based on direct personal experience and that all pupils should be given the opportunity to learn the skills of participation and responsible action. They consider that "democratic skills and attitudes do not emerge from formal lessons and examinations alone" (The National Curriculum Citizenship Order, 2002)

The Advisory Group on Citizenship stated

> Schools should make every effort to engage pupils in discussion
> and consultation about all aspects of school life on which pupils
> might reasonably be expected to have a view, and wherever possible
> to give pupils responsibility and experience in helping to run parts
> of the school.
>   (Crick, 1998. p.36)

In 1989, Markwich claimed that "over 50% of schools in inner London operate some form of pupil council" (Markwich, 1989, p12). In 1992, an Advisory Centre for Education survey found that, out of a survey of 480 randomly selected schools in the

UK, about one-third had school councils (Taylor & Johnson, 2002, p11). By 1994, Gold was claiming that "approximately one sixth of secondary schools have "active" school councils" (Gold, 1994, p13). There is now renewed interest in student councils in English schools as a result of the recent Order.

The national quality standards for the healthy schools programme also require schools to have a clear strategy for involving pupils in planning which is responsive to young people's expressed needs. They advise schools to establish an appropriate process for consulting students.

School Councils UK claim that student councils provide the structures within which the overall aims of the citizenship curriculum can be achieved. They say that the school development plan should include a commitment to training and empowering students. They provide such training. They recommend there should be student councils at all levels of education, starting with class councils and from these, a whole school student council of not more than twenty students could be elected. They state clearly how a school might set about initiating a student council and how to make that council effective. They recommend that students be involved in several aspects of school life

> The key concepts of student participation and school councils
> should be included – at school and at departmental level – in
> policy development, school improvement, curriculum reviews,
> and school based self-evaluation processes.
>   Clay, Gold & Hannam, 2002. p.13)

Ofsted, in its notes to Inspectors says that for a school council to be effective it must have some "real powers and influence on matters that the young people themselves think important" (Clay, Gold & Hannam, 2002. p3).

Prior to the recent citizenship curriculum student councils in England experienced varying degrees of success depending on the will of management and the interest of the pupils concerned. They existed on an ad hoc basis. With the strong backing of the government interest in teaching students about citizenship, student councils in England

can look forward to a new lease of life based on the favourable results of research into their beneficial effects on schools and on the strong advocacy of the Department for Education and Employment.

f) Council of Europe Project

The Council of Europe was founded to achieve unity between European parliamentary democracies. It is the oldest of the European political institutions and has forty-one member states. It has its headquarters in Strasbourg. The Council for Cultural Co-operation (CDCC) is responsible for the Council of Europe's work on education, culture and sport. At present, there are projects on education for democratic values, history, modern languages, school links and exchanges and many other related areas. One of these is a project called "Everyone can make a difference".

This project was initiated in Dublin in 1998 during the eighth conference of the members of the Council of Europe's Network for School Links and Exchanges. One of the motives behind the project was the desire to focus on projects that would foster education for Democratic Citizenship that is one of the Council of Europe's priority themes. The Greek and Irish members proposed the topic and it was accepted unanimously. It was planned to include ten member states: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Romania and Slovenia. Each participating country would include two schools. The official languages were to be English and French. The main question of the project was "To what extent is the modern school a democratic place and to what degree is the participation of all school protagonists (pupils and teachers) the desired and expected?" The words "democracy" and "participation" constantly recur. The project aimed at contributing to education for democratic citizenship by raising pupils' and teachers' awareness about participation in the school community and by helping them to acquire and develop the skills they need in order to make their participation successful.

At the initial training seminar of the participating countries, which was held in Athens in May 1999, each school was asked to design a project which addressed aspects of democratic participation which were relevant to their own situations. One of the projects proposed was the setting up of a school council. The majority of the participants opted to belong to this group.

They were asked to return to their schools and to set a school council in motion in their own schools. They were to seek the support of the school principal, canvass the opinion of the staff and students on the idea of a school council and, if possible, set up a pilot school council. They were also asked to seek information on school councils in other schools. They planned to set up an Internet link for the teachers and the pupils on the proposed school councils. This project is still ongoing. Its Europe-wide involvement demonstrates the importance placed on raising awareness of the issue of good citizenship and approaching it through the establishment of student councils.

g) Conclusion

In this brief résumé of student councils in other countries we see that the United States of America have the longest tradition of involving their students in the decision making process in their schools. It is not only unquestioned but expected that in every high school and most middle schools the students would play a participatory role. There are even student councils in some junior schools. These student councils are organised into networks, locally, state-wide and nationally. Yet in the more than fifty years of their existence they are still concerned with reluctance and even resistance to them from the teaching staff. It is left to each school to define the role and level of involvement of the student council. This apparent openness leads to conflict.

Student councils in Canada are in their infancy. They are called school councils rather than student councils as the emphasis is on parental involvement rather than on students. Perhaps, with the development of parental involvement, especially if that

turns out to be a positive experience, then the movement towards participation will be extended to the students in their own right and the more familiar student councils will become a part of the school system in Canada.

Norway has taken student councils very seriously indeed. They approached the situation from the perspective of democratic principles. The overall participation levels in their schools are much higher than elsewhere. Students are involved in decisions regarding the curriculum, the timetable and school organisation. They are also involved in teacher assessment. This is a long way from the more traditional situation in most countries. Norway uses a centralised approach to student councils and issues clear guidelines to the schools and the students.

In England School Councils, as they are called in that country, have existed for many years on an ad hoc basis, even though they are widely recognised as contributing, among other things, to raising academic standards and lowering school expulsion rates. However, recently they have been given a new lease of life with the introduction of the citizenship curriculum. It is expected that student councils will play a major role in the deliverance of this compulsory programme.

The group of countries participating in the Council of Europe project is in the exploratory stage. They see the positive possibilities for student councils and are endeavouring to fulfil their aims. It will take many years but there is present much enthusiasm that will carry the project forward.

1.7 The Significance of this research.

Where does Ireland stand in this global attempt to involve students in the decision making process in the schools? That is one of the questions this study expects to answer. The recent legislation has set down a marker. It is now up to the schools to take up the gauntlet and follow through. Some schools are ahead of the legislation and

already have a system of student participation in place. Other schools are fearful of the

idea of student councils and see them as the thin edge of the wedge. They fear that the

students will be "running the schools next". Gold states

> There seems to be a prevailing, somewhat irrational fear that
> if you give pupils a council, they will immediately
> develop their own agenda, which will be in conflict with that
> of the staff.
>
> (Gold, 1994. p.18)

Students may even want to assess the performance of teachers as is done in Norway

already. This study will provide information to fuel the forthcoming debate.

Chapter 2

2.1 Student Councils in Ireland.

a) Legislation

The idea of student councils was first mooted in the Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World*, published in 1992. Under the heading "Developing Political and Social Awareness" it stated

> This dimension would be enhanced by a requirement that all
> second-level schools have a representative council for students.
> As well as giving students a greater say in the running of their schools,
> this council would give students experience in public discussion and
> mutual persuasion.
>
> (Ireland, 1992, p.15)

This idea of a student council is taken up again in the White Paper on Education that was published in 1995. Under the heading of "Relationships within the School" it stated

> In order to facilitate this consultation [between school and students],
> **the board of management of each second-level school will be**
> **encouraged to promote the formulation of a students' council,**
> which will work in collaboration with the staff and the parents'
> association.
>
> (Ireland, 1995, p.163)

The Dáil passed the Education Act in December 1998 and Section 27, 1-6 dealt with student councils (see appendix 1). The Act encouraged boards of management to facilitate students of post-primary schools to set up a student council. It stated that

> A student council shall promote the interests of the school and
> the involvement of students in the affairs of the school, in
> co-operation with the board, parents and teachers.
>
> (Ireland, 1998, p.26).

The Act went on to state that the rules for the establishment of the student council would be the responsibility of the board as would its dissolution should that be deemed necessary. After its establishment, the student council could make its own rules

regarding its meetings and the conduct of its affairs, in consultation with the board of management.

Before any reference to student councils by the Department of Education many schools had instituted their own system of prefects. Some schools already had a tradition of class prefects (Lynch, 1999). These were students, appointed by management or chosen by the students, who took on a leadership role within the class. Sometimes this role extended into the wider community of the school. Lynch (1989), in her survey of Irish schools, found that 90% of girls' schools surveyed, compared to 55% of boys' schools and 53% of co-educational schools, had prefects. She also found that 53.7% of schools with prefects allowed pupils a totally free choice in the selection of prefects. In 20.4%, the staff alone chose the prefects and in the remaining 25.9% both staff and pupils were involved in selection.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) stated the following rights for children

> The right to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken
> into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child.(Article 12)

and

> The right of freedom of expression and to obtain and impart
> information, and to express his or her view, unless this would
> violate the rights of others. (Article 13)

These "rights" were also included in the Children Act of 1989 in Britain. Yet Harber (1995) reports that the first international audit (1995) of children's rights in Britain accused the government of repeatedly violating the convention. One criticism was that children were not consulted over the running of their schools and should be taught their rights as part of their education.

In a number of schools in Ireland, the students were consulted to some degree on school matters, but they had no "rights" to such consultation. By the inclusion of student councils in the Education Act, the Department was clearly stating that it wanted

students nationally to be informed and consulted on a more formal basis regarding school decision making. This was now implied as the "right" of the student. It could be seen as the natural progression within a collaborative management style. Yet some teachers viewed the possibility of a student council in their school with fear and apprehension (Gold, 1997 & Monahan, 1999). Information regarding student councils, their composition, their role and their effectiveness was needed; a) to inform teachers, management and students, b) to address the fears and apprehension of some staff members and c) to persuade teachers, management, parents and students that such inclusion could be beneficial.

b) What is a Student Council?

The legislation does not elaborate on what constitutes a student council. The Minister for Education and Science, Micheál Martin, while attending a one-day seminar on student councils in Cork in October 1999 said that this omission was deliberate. He did not wish the legislation to curtail the individuality of the schools. He recommended that each school should develop its own model of student council in line with its philosophy and traditions.

As a result of this broad recommendation there are almost as many models of student council as there are post primary schools. The most recently established councils have taken the notion of student representation as their central focus, while many more traditional schools have renamed their prefect system as the student council. Still others have nominated senior students as representatives of the junior classes and call this the student council.

The recent publication by the NYCI (2001) places strong emphasis on representation of all class groups in all student councils. They point out that representing the students is the main aim of any student council. Minister Woods, in his publication of the Guidelines for student councils (2002) includes a definition of a student council. It, too,

emphasises the representative nature of a council while still allowing schools to take consideration of their own traditions.

By the conclusion of this research it will be possible to establish the essential elements of a student council and so to clarify the situation. In the meantime, this research will use the term "student council" to refer to any group of students, whether voted for or appointed, whether all senior students or a combination of senior and junior students, who meet together regularly, either under staff direction or alone, to discuss the welfare of the student body, as a student council.

c) Research into student councils in Ireland

Few pieces of research on student councils have been located in Irish Universities by this researcher. The first and earliest of these was that completed by Jean Browne in 1996. Her work was entitled "Advantages and Disadvantages of Membership of a Student Council to Students". It was submitted at University College, Cork, in fulfilment of the requirements for a Master's Degree in Education.

Browne tested two hypotheses; 1) that students report that membership of a student council is of no advantage to students and 2) that students report that membership of a student council is not a disadvantage to students. Both hypotheses were rejected. Browne identified the advantages of membership of a student council as a) students developed leadership, organisational and financial skills, and b) they learned the value of teamwork, how to make decisions and deal with conflict (Browne, 1996. p.32). The disadvantages were a) a lack of autonomy, b) a lack of training and development, and c) it was time consuming.

The social/psychological advantages were a) liaison with staff and students created a more co-operative atmosphere, b) closer identification with authority structures within the school, c) increased confidence and raised self-esteem. d) it enhanced one's *curriculum vitae*. The social/psychological disadvantages were a) closer identification

with authority within the school had its negative side, e.g., conflicting loyalties, b) dealing with the apathy of some students and teachers and c) unrealistic expectations of them.

Browne surmised that if school authorities were more aware of the advantages and disadvantages of membership of a student council they would be more understanding and more supportive of the members. This, she maintained, would be to the advantage of all concerned. She recommended that there be a clearer role definition for the student council and its members. She also recommended that adequate preparation and on-going training and development be made available to students.

The Browne study involved 126 respondents to a questionnaire that was distributed to nine city second level schools. It makes no claim to representativeness as a non-probability method of convenience was used.

The value of this research lies in the fact that it broke new ground. It is also noteworthy in that it found that there was a perception of more advantages than disadvantages to students in being a student council member.

John O'Neill also conducted a research topic, "Improving the Effectiveness of a Student Council in a Secondary School" at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth as part of a course for the Higher Diploma in Educational Management in 1997.

O'Neill's research set out to identify 1) the strengths of the present student council in one particular secondary school, 2) the weaknesses of the present student council and 3) recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the present system. The research method was a questionnaire completed by the staff and past members of the student council. It makes no claim to reliability, validity or representativeness. The strengths identified, from the staff viewpoint and in order of priority, were; maintenance of good order, weekly meeting of the prefect with his/her assigned junior class, liaison role, "snitching" on student misdemeanours and teaching democratic values. Members of the

student council ranked the strengths as follows; weekly meeting with their junior class, liaison role, organisational entitlements, culprit identification and learning about democratic rights. The weaknesses from the staff viewpoint were that it was under-utilised and that it lacked a high profile and a clearly defined, easily understood role in the running of the school. They also identified a lack of leadership awareness among the students. The members saw the greatest weakness to be the council's isolation from the everyday lives of most students, teachers and the principal. They also felt that the council had no clearly stated aims for each year. O'Neill recommended that the council should set aims and goals for the year, get more involved with junior students, appoint the council at the end of fifth year, elevate the status of the council and engage in greater consultation and greater council/staff interaction.

This study would be of greatest interest to the school involved. However, the section on the history of the student council is of interest to other schools planning to set up their own council. Overall the study is in favour of a well run student council. It emphasises the need for planning, support and commitment.

Karen Fox submitted her study on student participation in decision making in second level schools in 2000. She pointed out that one third of Irish citizens were under the age of eighteen. Yet she states that they are "the least represented, consulted or visible group when it comes to policy making." (Fox, 2000, p.1) Fox examines the extent of the information available to students, their consultation, partnership, delegation and control in school decision making. Two years after the passing of the Education Act, Fox asks, "whether it is time that pupils begin to be recognised as partners in educational decision-making procedures " (p.2).

Fox argues that there cannot be partnership with students while the present partnership between the Department for Education and Science (DES), the schools and parents is so unequal. McCluskey (1996, p.90) supports this when she states that partnership

suggests an equality of power which in turns creates false expectations since the DES

always make the final decision. Fox states that the DES "consults" rather than shares

with its partners in education. Fox also presents the case that parents and teachers do

not trust students in decision making;

> The study exposed that there continues to be a conception
> among parents and teachers that young people are not rational
> and do not yet possess the skills to actively participate in
> decision-making.
>
> (Fox, 2000. p.61)

Fox also found that there was a level of fear among the teachers regarding the

breakdown of discipline if there was an increase in the level of student involvement in

school matters (p.43). Fox attributes this to a lack of a clearly defined role for the

student council within the school. She advises that

> Boundaries need to be clarified so that everyone recognises
> their and each other's role in relation to decision-making and
> accountability
>
> (Fox, 2000. p.62).

Fox refers to the level of student interest in politics when she states that

> Results showed that young people know very little about politics,
> express little interest in it and feel the political system does not
> reach them.
>
> (Fox, 2000. p.61)

This is an important finding as the establishment of student councils is looked on as an

important way of demonstrating to students the benefits of democracy.

Fox concludes with a plea that "staff, management and the students need to support the

idea of establishing mechanisms for student involvement in decision-making" (p.61).

She states that students must be given responsibility and their opinions must be

accorded due attention.

d) Literature on student councils in an Irish context.

There are many references to student involvement in school decision making throughout

the literature on pastoral care. These come under such headings as student leadership,

student empowerment, giving students a voice, inclusion etc. Here we are concerned with the scant Irish literature referring specifically to student councils.

The first of these is an article in 1990 written by Duffy and Flynn describing how and why four Monaghan second level schools came together to set up a training programme for their own student council members. As with the research findings later of Browne (1996), Duffy and Flynn found that there were unrealistic and often conflicting expectations of the student councils that lead to frustration and discouragement among the members. Duffy and Flynn were completely convinced of the benefits of a leadership course. They stated;

> We believe that good leadership from among the student body is a
> real asset to a school. It makes for better student-staff relations, it
> aids towards smooth school organisation and it can improve the
> quality of life in the school for all.
> (Duffy & Flynn, 1990. pp. 17-18)

They made four recommendations, which were

1) to provide a clear "job" specification

2) to involve both staff and students in prefect selection,

3) to provide leadership training and

4) to hold regular meetings of student leaders supported by a staff

member.

This article highlighted the fact that there were schools in the country which were ahead of the government in encouraging student involvement in school decision making.

In the south of the country, O'Gorman was involved in similar research as Duffy and Flynn and coming to the same conclusions. She wrote about her findings in an article published in "Issues in Education" in 1998 under the title "School Councils - Why Bother?" Its aim was to encourage other schools to establish student councils. Her article concentrates on practical suggestions on the formation and running of a student council.

In 1999 Luke Monahan published a book entitled *Moving Forward with Students* stating that the purpose of his book was to

> sketch how the school community can enable students take up
> their crucial role in the life of the whole school - a role that is
> theirs as of right".
>
> (Monahan, 1999. p.1)

He started out by listing the fears of teachers regarding student councils. They were similar to those found by Fox (2000). He countered this list of fears with a list of the benefits accruing to a school with a student council. He used the term "student partnership in education", a term less challenging to the traditional role of the teacher (one of the fears listed previously).

Monahan put together a model for a student council, using the best practices he had encountered in his research for his book. He dealt with staff involvement, setting objectives, selection of members, training and evaluation. Lynch (1990), Duffy and Flynn (1990) and O'Gorman (1998) had all stressed the vital role of training for council members. Monahan was no exception. He supported his ideas with the results of what he called "a small survey", by means of a questionnaire, of 190 senior students in seven schools. He found that the primary function of the student council was "to represent the views of students in meetings with staff and/or principal (Monahan, 1999. p.40).

Two publications issued since the empirical work of this research was completed are invaluable to a school either setting up a council or encountering difficulties with their present council. The Department of Education itself has published the first of these entitled, *Student Councils: a voice for students, (2002)*. Minister Woods states in the letter accompanying the publication that

> The guidelines are intended to provide practical guidance for school
> management, teachers and students in the establishment and operation
> of student councils.

The guidelines themselves start out with a definition of a student council;

> A Student Council is a representative structure through which
> students in a post-primary school can become involved in the

affairs of the school, working in partnership with school management
and staff and parents for the benefit of the school and its students.
(Ireland; 2002. p.8)

The guidelines recognise that students have a valuable contribution to make to the

effectiveness of their school and the quality of the education provided therein. The

publication reiterates the findings of research regarding the benefits for students in

running a council, e.g. improving academic standards, communication, planning and

organisational skills and reducing the dropout rates. They also state that running a

council helps students to take responsibility and to see projects "through to a successful

conclusion" (Ireland, 2002, p8). They state that "...the operation of the council is itself

a valuable part of the education process for the students" (Ireland, 2002. p8).

The guidelines recognise that students are part of the partnership in education. They

remind us that the council is not an end in itself but must help to build a sense of

partnership between management and students.

The skill of listening is referred to often in the guidelines. They strongly emphasise that

the Board of Management has a responsibility to listen to the students through the

council and should respond appropriately to the council. They also state that the council

must listen to the student body and take their views into serious consideration. The

council must keep the students informed of their activities.

It is the duty of the Board of Management to compile the rules for the student council.

The guidelines see the procedure as follows; the students express a desire to set up a

council, the Board compiles a set of rules and encourages and supports the students to

set up the council. If the initiative does not come from the students, then management

could set the process in motion.

The Board of Management is responsible at all times for the council and its activities. It

retains the power to dismiss the whole council or part of it if they deem that it is not

functioning for the benefit of the school. However, they are reminded that due process

must be followed, that students must be notified and given an opportunity to explain

their actions before a decision is made by the board. Lynch (1999) argues that as long

as the Board of Management holds the power to dissolve the student council, then it is

undemocratic.

The latter part of the guidelines contain suggestions on the setting up and running of the

council, while still emphasising that each school must consider its own particular

circumstances. Great emphasis is placed on the representativeness of the council. The

booklet states that, if possible, each class should be represented. If that is not possible,

then each year group must be represented.

Two copies of the guidelines have been issued to each school. These numbers make it

impossible to issue students with copies. On enquiry, no further copies could be

obtained from the DES.

The second publication of interest to schools is entitled *Youth Participation,*

Citizenship, Democracy —learning the skills of active democratic participation. The

National Youth Council of Ireland issued this in 2001. It, too, starts off with a

definition of a Student Council;

> A Student Council is a group of second level students, within a
> school, elected to represent their fellow students.
> (NYCI. 2001. p.9)

The aim of the council is to "act as a representative body and liaise with other students,

staff, school board and parents' association on matters of importance to young people

within the school" (p.9). This publication recognises that the essential elements of a

Student Council are to represent, to involve students and to act in co-operation with the

other partners in education. The book goes on to emphasise that a Student Council is

"primarily a voice for students and a forum for them to work with the structures within a

school" (p.10). A publication like this has more scope than the guidelines issued by the

Department of Education. It includes a list of possible activities for a council, giving examples from successful Student Councils. It highlights the responsibilities of the members of the council, especially the officers. It suggests pathways to follow to increase the possibility of success and the pitfalls to avoid. Like the Department Guidelines it places great importance on the representativeness of the council, pointing out that a council of senior students only is not representative of the whole school;

> 58% of Student Councils are selected by every class in the
> school electing a representative to sit on the council........
> probably the fairest and best system.
>   (NYCI. 2001.pp.19-20)

> Denying some students the right to participate fully on their
> Student Council is unfair and will undermine the credibility
> of the council in the eyes of many students.
>   (NYCI, 2001.p.24)

The NYCI suggests a formal approach to nominations, elections, counting etc. and they explain the procedures very simply.

The book also includes the findings of its own research (2000) regarding the numbers of schools with a Student Council, how they were elected and the opinions of students and teachers. It confirms earlier research when it states that the skills learned by the students are significant e.g. responsibility, organisational skills and participation.

The NYCI recognises that there are differing opinions regarding the benefits of Student Councils. They state that their aim is to "improve the quality and level of democratic representation and participation among young people in dialogue and decision making" (p.5). They believe that Student Councils will do that. They point out the differing views of principals and students and say that there is no point in denying the differences. They must be brought out in the open, discussed and resolved (NYCI, 2000. p12).

2.2 The Five Key Consideration of the White Paper.

a) Framework.

The White Paper on Education sought to formulate a philosophical framework that would not only ultimately serve Irish education but also more immediately guide the creation of the proposed Education Bill and Act. While seeking to establish a framework for her study, this researcher returned to this publication and located the following words

> the State's concern is with a number of key considerations
> which should underpin the formulation and evaluation of
> educational policy and practice- principally, the promotion
> of quality, equality, pluralism, partnership and accountability.
> (Ireland, 1995. p.3)

The above quotation is taken from Chapter 1, "Philosophical Rationale for Educational Policy and Practice". Such considerations form a bedrock from which Student Councils could be judged. That is the aim of this research. It is proposed to take each of the key considerations in turn, to review the relevant literature and to estimate how each could be supported by the establishment in every second level school of a student council.

b) Equality

<u>(i) Introduction</u>

This researcher will address the first of these considerations, equality in education, under five headings, in order to clarify and define the terms within the present Irish context. Under each heading she will review the attempts of the government to take into account the findings of research regarding equality in that area and its attempts to translate those findings into educational policies and practices. This researcher will then review literature on student councils that suggest that equality might be supported by the establishment of a student council.

(ii) Socio-economic status, equality in education and student councils.

Coinciding with the debate in America regarding equality in education, there was the publication in Ireland in 1960 of *Investment in Education*. This publication highlighted the many failings of the Irish education system. In the area of equality it maintained that there was

> mounting evidence of certain inequalities in the system.
> Access to, participation in and success derived from
> education were all found to be related to educationally
> irrelevant factors such as place of residence, gender, and
> most significantly social background or socio-economic status.
> (CMRS, 1988. p.ii)

Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, numbers attending post primary schools in Ireland increased dramatically (Coolahan, 1995. p.ii). This increase in numbers highlighted the situation of the disadvantaged groups within education. With the publication of the White Paper on Education in 1995, we see a clear strategy for dealing with disadvantage in education, one section of which dealt with the aim to increase retention rates in post primary schools (Ireland, 1995. p.44).

During the 80's and the 90's the government set up free pre-school schemes for disadvantaged children, introduced extra financial assistance for schools designated as disadvantaged, reformed the post primary curriculum to render it more acceptable and relevant to the broader range of abilities and interests of the pupils now attending second level schools, introduced a new state examination system and made attempts to remove selective academic entry to post primary schools. The government set itself a target of 90% retention rates in education up to Leaving Certificate level by the year 2000 and 98% by 2007 (Fine Gael, 1998. p.4).

Retention rates could be assisted with the establishment of a representative student council in second level schools. One reason for dropping out of school is the feeling of alienation and marginalisation felt by some students. Rutter (1979) used truancy as one

of his indicators of effectiveness. The recent Education Welfare Bill cites truancy as

one of the first signs of future early dropout. Trafford (1997 p.90) maintained that his

research demonstrated " that levels of disaffection among students decreased steadily as

they felt more valued and empowered". Empowered children, he stated, tended to speak

out rather than become alienated.

Much has been written concerning the benefits to the school organisation and ethos of

staff empowerment. If this is so desirable and beneficial for staff would it not be so for

students? Levin (1994) stated

> If teachers need to understand the reasons for particular
> policies and activities, might not the same be true of students?
> If teachers learn better when their learning is closely connected to
> their real situation might not the same apply to students? If teachers
> deserve an important role in influencing the conditions under which
> they work, might not students?
>
> (Levin, 1994, p.90)

Student empowerment can be approached through the establishment of a student

council. By involvement in the council and/or the selection of its members, students are

given a sense of ownership of the goals of the school. It gives them a voice in policy

formation and so greater commitment to the implementation of those policies. Trafford

said that as democratisation increased in his school, it led to a perceived improvement in

the contentment of teachers and students in the school, to a lowering of stress levels and

to raised standards of achievement (Trafford, 1997, p.10).

One objective of education is to produce future citizens (Ireland, 1995). The ESRI in

1991 found that less than 20% of school leavers felt that they had been equipped by

their education to make mature political, social or civic decisions (O'Neill, 1997, p.18).

Banks et al in 1992 said that the "political apathy and incoherence of much of the

political opinion" of a group of 16-19 year olds he studied was a form of inequality. He

maintained that those going on to further education developed political awareness but

those not continuing their education were politically alienated and impotent and thus

were "inequal". He was arguing for education for citizenship in schools. He supported the establishment of student councils.

In Britain a commission was set up to look at ways in which citizens of that country could participate fully and effectively in society. The Right HON. Bernard Weatherill M.P., Speaker of the House of Commons, chaired the commission. In his preamble to the report, published in 1990, Weatherill stated

> I believe that citizenship, like anything else, has to be learned.
> Young people do not become good citizens by accident, any
> more than they become good nurses....
>
> (HMSO, 1990. p.v)

Further on in the report he maintained that "citizenship should be a part of the education of every pupil from early years right through to further and higher education"(HMSO, 1990. p. xvi). He believed that

> Young people should leave a school with some confidence
> in their ability to participate in their society, to resolve conflict and,
> if they oppose a course of action, to express that opposition fairly,
> effectively and peacefully.
>
> (HMSO, 1990. p.37)

Weatherill recommended that one way of doing this would be "taking responsibility by representing others, for example on a School Council" (HMSO, 1990. p.38). The implications of this statement is that the disadvantaged might remain in school longer and become more involved citizens as a result of the positive effects of a student council in their school.

(iii) Gender equality in education and student councils.

In 1983 the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) was commissioned by the government to enquire into and write a report entitled *Schooling and Sex Roles*. The report stated

> This sex role differentiation extends back to early learning or
> socialisation experiences of male and female infants and it is
> clearly represented in the cultural assumptions underlying the
> main educational institutions.
>
> (ESRI, 1983. p. xxii)

The report found that sex differentiation in our education system was very deeply institutionalised. It was entrenched in ideology and cultural presumptions, in expectations and in self-definitions.

State policy on the issue of gender equality was set out in the Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World* (1992, pp. 67-72). It stated

> Education, therefore, must contribute to the breaking down of stereotypes, the opening up of opportunities, and the growth and self-esteem of all, irrespective of sex.
>
> (Ireland, 1992. p.68)

The *Report of the National Education Convention* (1994) advocated positive intervention programmes in an effort to redress the imbalance. The White Paper (1995), *Charting Our Education Future*, reiterated that "full equality between women and men is a fundamental human right".

In 1996 the ESRI again published findings regarding gender differences in Irish education. Although, by the time of the publication of this report, government policy on gender issues had been set out clearly, the report found that it had not been very effective. The issue of gender equality in education is in urgent need of effective interventions. Subject provision, allocation and choices made by pupils have been found to be discriminatory (ESRI, 1992 & 1996)). The effectiveness of government policies has been questioned (ESRI, 1996) and greater accountability called for. Direct interventions within each school, as called for in the 1997 report by the Equality Committee, need to be implemented. One vehicle for this might be a representative student council in each school. The composition of the council might reflect the proportions of male and female students within the school. Thus the issue of gender balance would find a practical expression in the lives of the students. They would include gender issues naturally in their discussions and decisions. They would look to management to do the same. The student council could make its own submission to the

annual gender equality audit demanded by the Equality Committee (Warren & O'Connor, 1999).

(iv) Multiple Intelligences, equality in education and student councils

A third category of student who experiences inequality in the Irish education system are those students whose pattern of intelligences does not match the definition of intelligence held by the Department of Education.

Psychologists and educationalists have been attempting to define intelligence for one hundred years beginning with Binet early in the twentieth century. What exactly intelligence was and how or whether it could be measured were hotly debated and is outside the scope of this research. But general agreement was that it was a unitary, fixed capacity. That is, until Howard Gardener published his theory of intelligence in *Frames of Mind* in 1984. He identified seven (later he added an eighth) different intelligences, which indicated that intelligence was multiple. Other researchers in the field (Lawrence, 1982, Keirsey & Bates, 1984, Riding, 1991) concentrate on "learning styles" rather than intelligences.

Our culture and consequently our education system, emphasises linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence. Our teaching methods, our textbooks, our examination system, all favour the student strong in these two intelligences. If we are seriously committed to equal opportunities for all students then we must consider the issue of M.I. and the employment of a more active and varied methodology in teaching and assessment. An active student council could be part of that experiential learning methodology, giving students who are strong in intelligences other than logical/mathematical an opportunity to demonstrate their strengths.

The active learning encouraged by Gardner was also recommended by the NCCA when they were incorporating into the Irish curriculum the new subject of Civil, Social and Political Education (CSPE). O'Neill (1997) expresses his view that

It is hard to see how schools can inculcate in young people
respect for law, respect for the rights of others and an
understanding of democratic processes when these same
principles are not embodied in the living out of school life.
(O'Neill, 1997. p.5)

"Some values," stated the Schools Council of Britain in 1981, "like those of

democracy, tolerance and responsibility, grow only with experience of them." Hepburn

(1984) had previously endorsed this belief.

Hepburn maintained that

democratic experiences in the school and the classroom do
contribute to the participatory awareness, skills and attitudes
fundamental to life in democratic societies.
(Hepburn, 1984. p.261)

Browne (1996) confirmed this when she listed the skills acquired by members of a

student council. When the Green Paper (1992) first mentioned student representative

councils it did so under the heading "Developing Political and Social Awareness". It

stated

The school must seek to create an environment that fosters a
sense of political and social awareness, of civic and social
responsibility, within a caring society. In this regard, the school
should involve students in an active and responsible way in
decision-making, commensurate with their level of maturity.
(Ireland, 1992. p.35)

As early as 1978 Stacey stated that children begin to develop political values and

attitudes from as young as four or five years. Bottery later reiterated this in 1990. He

maintained that a child had both the right and the ability to participate in school

management decisions. Davies (1995) in her suggested structure for a democratic

school places the establishment of a student council as her number one priority. By

experiencing their own representative council students are actively learning about

democracy, the rights of individuals and groups, and the compromises necessary in life.

The NCCA stated that

...it is difficult to imagine students as active citizens if
their experience of learning about citizenship has been
predominantly passive.
(NCCA, 1993. p.16)

In putting together the programme for CSPE, the NCCA viewed the school as a microcosm of the larger communities in society. It maintained that the messages the school conveyed to students about civic, social and political issues could not be confined to one slot on the timetable and, since CSPE was to employ an active methodology, then opportunities for participation and practise of the skills of the programme should be offered to the students. Concepts and skills were to be taught by active, participatory, learning-by-doing and practical experience. These aims would be fulfilled in the establishment of a representative student council within the school.

(v) Disability, equality in education and student councils

In 1993, the Report of the Special Education Review Committee was published. It listed among the present weaknesses a lack of legislation governing education, gaps in provision, insufficient specialist training for teachers and a high dropout level at post-primary.

The White Paper, *Charting Our Education Future* (1995) devoted a section within the primary and second-level chapters to Students with Special Needs reiterating the right of every child to an education according to his/her potential and ability. It stated

> The achievement of full equality of access, participation and benefit
> for all students will entail positive intervention at all levels in favour
> of those minorities who experience particular difficulties.
> (Ireland, 1995. p.24)

This minority of "special" students in post primary schools could be vulnerable to discrimination and marginalisation and hence drop out of education entirely as suggested in the Report (1993). John & Osborn (1992) studied two secondary schools, one democratic and one traditional. They found that the students in the democratic school were more ardent supporters of race and gender equality. Trafford (1997 p.90) believed that empowered students will "readily condemn bullying, racism or other unkind behaviour among their peers". Could, as suggested by John & Osburn (1992)

and Trafford (1997), a student council help the integration of vulnerable students into the school community and reduce the high level of early dropout at post primary level?

(vi) Conclusion

This brief review of equality literature and Irish government policy highlights the complexity of the problem of inequality in education and its multiple manifestations in student behaviour. Among the issues mentioned were raising retention rates in post primary schools, citizenship education, gender imbalance, the need for interactive teaching and assessment and the problem of early dropout within minority groups. Could the establishment of a student council alleviate these difficulties and help to deliver on the key consideration of equality, an educational principle set by the government? The research literature cited, mostly from outside Ireland, suggests that this is possible. This present research will seek to establish if this is so in an Irish context.

c) Quality.

(i) Introduction

After the introduction of free secondary education in Ireland in 1967, the Department of Education was taken up with the issue of equality. It was not until the last quarter of the twentieth century that attention was given to the quality of that education.

> Questions of international competitiveness in an economic era of
> static or decreasing budgets, allied to political philosophies of customer
> satisfaction, and tied in with educational issues of professional performance
> have all combined to make "quality" one of the keywords of the 1990's.
>
> (Bottery, 1995. p.33)

Quality of education was a concern of many countries. In America it was called "Standards-Based education", "outcomes based education" or "performance-based education"(National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 1996). All three titles referred to education based on a philosophy that suggested that every student, with good teaching, should be able to reach defined standards of performance.

In the U.K. the issue of quality of education was addressed under the general title of

school improvement. Prior to 1988, there was no national curriculum in England.

There was a tremendous amount of variation in student performance and in the quality

of teacher's performance (Linden, 1997). Funding for schools was drastically reformed,

a national curriculum was introduced, educational standards were set, assessment at key

stages was introduced and schools were made accountable for the performance of their

teachers and students. Information accumulated and recorded was made available to

parents and other interested outside bodies. League tables of the results of the key

assessments were compiled and students and parents voted with their feet. "Failing"

schools were either closed down or assisted to improve their standards.

In September, 1992, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) was set up. Its

remit was to improve standards of achievement and quality of education through regular

independent inspection, public reporting and informed independent advice.

In Ireland, the White Paper on Education (1995) stated that

> Students are entitled to the highest possible standard of
> teaching and to be facilitated in the attainment of the highest
> quality of learning.
>
> (Ireland, 1995. p.7)
>
> Quality is brought about by maximising the efforts of all
> those responsible for the education of students and by
> co-ordinating all the structures of the system...
>
> (Ireland, 1995. p.8)

Several interdependent factors have been identified as contributing to such quality.

These included "the competence of staff, school leadership, the quality of planning,

pupil-teacher ratios, support services, the social context and level of parental and

community support" (Coolahan, 1993. p.55). This researcher will look briefly at each

of these factors and suggest ways in which the establishment of a student council might

contribute towards the delivery of the key consideration of quality in Irish education.

(ii) Competence of staff and student councils.

The competence and commitment of the teaching profession, in Ireland, is high.

Professor Coolahan, of the Department of Education in NUI Maynooth stated

> There are now more teachers engaged in in-service courses than
> pre-service courses. They have to pay their own fees, and travel
> expenses, buy books and fit the commitment in around other work.
> And through it all they remain motivated, constructive and hard working,
> even in the current climate.
> (Coolahan, 1998. p.15)

This results in the high quality education on offer in Irish schools. The introduction of

collaborative management practices has led teachers to explore the idea of extending the

benefits of these factors to the students (O'Gorman, 2000). While some teachers are

fearful of "student power" (Monahan, 1999), others view the establishment of a student

council as the natural extension to the students of the benefits accruing to themselves of

collaborative management (O'Gorman, 2000).

> Student councils offer young people an opportunity to become more
> involved in their schools. Such involvement can enrich students' lives
> and have a positive effect on their success in school and in later lives."
> (O'Neill, 1997. p.1)

Thus the high level of competence in teachers in Irish schools has contributed to the

exploration of the idea of setting up student councils (O'Gorman, 2000) with the

objective of improving the quality of education in Irish schools.

(iii) School leadership and student councils.

In this brief review it is not possible to look at the broad area of leadership. This work

will confine itself to that referring to student leadership and student councils. The

quality of leadership in a school will depend on such factors as the philosophy of the

school and the principal (Sergiovanni, 1996). The philosophy will determine the vision.

Recent literature in this area has stated that the vision must be passed on to the students

as well as staff and parents and that student commitment to it will make a significant

contribution to the achievement of it (Monahan, 1999). O'Neill maintained that

When students participate in school activities, they derive feelings
of self worth and self actualisation, they learn useful skills, their social
and educational development is enhanced and they become highly motivated.
(O'Neill, 1997. p.14)

This viewpoint was supported by Ashworth when she wrote that

Many head teachers were convinced that student involvement in
school management had created a sense of ownership amongst the
students, which had brought about shared values between staff and
students.
(Ashworth, 1997. p.39)

The quality of leadership in a school will be reflected in the ethos of the school, "the
way we do things around here". This must be inclusive of the students (Monahan,
1999). One of the arguments expounded by the ACE report (Advisory Council for
Education, 1997) in support of student councils is that it is wrong for institutions which
are meant to act in the interests of children to systematically ignore their opinion. This
was the accusation levied against the British government in the report by Harber
(1995). Ashworth (1997, p.47) warns that "if student participation in school matters is
not tied into the school ethos, practice may wane with enthusiasm". O'Neill stated

the more inclusive a school is for all its natural constituencies, the
better it will serve and attain its purpose.
(O'Neill, 1997. p.19)

School Councils UK maintained that

.......schools which do not have a School
Council are losing an opportunity to improve management and devolve
responsibility and workload.
(Ashworth, 1997. p.2)

(iv) Planning and student councils.

School planning has become the watchword of the forward moving school. The
ultimate aim of school planning is the improvement of the quality of education(Ireland,
1998B). Monahan stated:

Most people will have a stronger commitment and feel more
ownership of any situation where they have had a say in the
planning. Pupils who understand what they are trying to achieve
in detail, how it is to be done and are able to maintain their progress

> towards their educational aims will be better motivated than those
> who are blindly following the directives given.
>
> (Monahan, 1995. p.147)

Monahan used this argument in support of the establishment of student councils in second level schools. When discussing school development planning, Monahan said that

> a true sign of significant recognition of the student voice will be the inclusion of students in discussions about future planning for the school.
>
> (Monahan, 1995. p.15)

This viewpoint is strengthened by the findings of the ACE report which stated that students in schools which had a School Council were more likely to be involved in school planning than a school without a student council (Ashworth, 1997.p.27). While discussing standards in education, Hodgkins (1998) maintains that any policy concerning school standards will be seriously weakened if it fails to recognise the importance of the contribution of students.

(v) Pupil/Teacher ratios and student councils.

The Ashworth report (1997) did not show any connection between pupil/teacher ratio and student councils. What it did show was that school size was an indicator of the likelihood that students would be consulted on school matters. Schools between the size of 750 to 1000 students were more inclined to seek the opinions of their students. However, Ashworth did point out that her sample was too small to generalise from it.

(vi) Support services and student councils.

Support services within the school include the Learning Support teacher, the Resource teacher, and the Home/School/Community Liaison co-ordinator, the Pastoral Care team and the Guidance teacher. Any resource that benefits the student will be reflected in an improvement in the quality of education. The student council might be one such resource.

One of the aims of the ISIS (Integrating Students into Schools, ASTI, 2000) programme is to improve the availability of support services for students. They maintained that this was "of great importance to the overall learning environment in schools" (p.5). They came out strongly in support of student councils (ASTI, 2000. p.84).

(vii) Social context and student councils.

The "social context" within the school could be interpreted as the ethos, the atmosphere, prevailing throughout the school. Two aspects deserve comment; those of the holistic approach(all round development) to education adopted by the school and the attitude towards discipline.

In Ireland there is serious competition to gain points for entry to third level education. This competition places tremendous pressure on students and teachers to concentrate all their efforts on gaining these essential points. This can be at the expense of the all-round development of the student. Partly as a consequence of this stress factor, and taking the pressure of modern life into consideration, many schools have become more conscious of the need to maintain a holistic education for their students (Feheney, 1999). This includes being aware of and heightening students' self esteem and confidence, a necessary component of a quality education, which in turn, is effected by students' perception of their inclusion/exclusion in the running of the school. Ashworth reported that

> Many schools aim to promote a sense of belonging amongst their
> students and they provide extensive testimony that School Councils
> and consultation with students are effective ways of achieving this aim.
> (Ashworth, 1997. p.40)

In the area of discipline, the Elton Report (1989) maintained that school councils were an essential part of any discipline code that hoped to gain the support of the students. Elton claimed that the extra responsibility taken on by the students in running a council

had a beneficial effect on discipline in the school. Ashworth (1997), commenting on the Elton Report, stated that

> Joint action by students, staff and governors will increase the sense
> of community throughout the school and schools which have a greater
> sense of community enjoy better standards of behaviour.
>
> (Ashworth, 1997.p.28)

Ashworth maintained that the obvious vehicle for this "joint action" is the student council. Later on in her report, she said that the issue of bullying can also be approached through the student council.

The Irish government, while discussing discipline in schools stated that they found" that successful teachers developed a class leader/student representative system to handle daily matters" (Ireland, 1995A. p.5). The same document recommended that, in reviewing a school's code of conduct, there was a perfect opportunity "to allow pupils to get involved in the life of the school and to assume appropriate levels of responsibility" (Ireland, 1995A. p.23). It included student councils as one form of possible involvement. It went on to state that

> The more pupils can identify with their school and the more they
> experience a partnership in working with teachers on non-academic
> projects, the more positive will be their attitude to school in general.
>
> (Ireland, 1995A. p.23)

(ix) Parental and community support and student councils.

The last of Coolahan's factors(1993) effecting the quality of education is parental and community support. This will be dealt with under the key consideration of "Partnership".

(x) Conclusion

Quality is one of the five key considerations highlighted by the government as essential to the delivery of a first class educational system in Ireland (Ireland, 1995). This brief review reveals that research to date advocates a higher level of student involvement in the running of the school than is currently in practice and that this higher level of inclusion will result in a higher quality education (O'Neill, 1997. Ashworth, 1997.

Monahan, 1995). The level of inclusion of students could be raised in such areas as school planning, classroom management and discipline. The government itself expressed the view that student involvement in these areas would be beneficial to the quality of education delivered in each school (Ireland, 1995A). Is the government right? Would the establishment of a student council in every post primary school help to deliver a better quality of education to our students? This research will seek an answer to that question.

d) Partnership.

(i) Introduction.

Partnership is the third of the five key considerations referred to in the White Paper on Education (1995). Crowley (1998, p.70) defined partnership in terms of a participatory democracy whereby "choice and influence are exercised continuously through active involvement in decision-making, planning and developing processes". Pugh (1989. p.15) explains partnership as a "working relationship characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate". Wolfendale (1992. p.14) stated that partnership involved active participation of the interested parties on an equal footing. Fox (2000) stated quite unequivocally that the partnership between the Department of Education, teachers and parents is not an equal one and to use the term "partnership" is misleading.

(ii) Parents and partnership.

The importance of the role of parents in their child's education was highlighted in the U.K. in the Plowden report (1967) which showed that parents' attitudes strongly influenced their children's progress at school. The Warnock Report (1978) saw parents as partners of teachers, although she modified her ideas later to that of collaboration between parents and teachers (Burke, 1992. p.192).

In Ireland the Green Paper (1992) gave formal recognition to the idea of parents as

partners in their child's education. It quoted the Irish Constitution,

Article 42

> It is the unalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according
> to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and
> social education of their children.

The Green Paper (1992) reiterated the recognition of the parent as the prime educator of

the child. It identified the principle of partnership as one of the core values

underpinning policy and practice. It gave as one of the six aims of the paper to

maximise parental involvement.

The White Paper (1995) set out policy proposals to provide formalised structures to

facilitate parental involvement; these included the setting up of the National Parents

Council, a parents council in each school, parents on Boards of Management and the

rights of parents of access to the educational records of their children. This range of

measures aimed at fostering active parental partnership with schools. Burke maintained

that

> Parental involvement in schools can be justified on a number
> of grounds: their rights and duties as the primary educators of
> their children, their rights as tax payers, their influence on child
> development and learning as borne out by research and their intimate
> knowledge of their children.
> (Burke, 1992. pp.190-191)

Research shows a positive relationship between parental involvement in schools and

student outcomes. The research into the characteristics of effective schools supports

these findings (Sammons, 1995). Coleman (1998) put forward a convincing argument

for teachers, parents and students to work together. He argued that parents influenced

their children's attitudes to school and teachers, and that teachers influenced the

attitudes of the parents, so that, by using collaborative methods, the triad could have a

positive effect on student achievement and retention in school. The findings of

Coleman reinforced those of Wang, Haertel and Walberg (1993) who found that the contribution of parents to pupil achievement was five times that of any other factor. Coleman argued that, if we leave the education of children solely to the professionals, then we are negating the contribution of parents. He advocated a change in the "power relationship" between the three central figures, teachers, parents and students to a more collaborative style.

(iii) Students and partnership.

There has been a concentration both in literature and in practice on the partnership of school and parents. The idea of the student as an integral part of the partnership was not expressed clearly until the Education Act in 1998. In the preamble it stated "....and is conducted in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents and teachers...." This inclusion of the student in the partnership was as a result of the growing pressure throughout the 90's to pay heed to children, to what they think, to what they feel, to what they want, to their rights. The White Paper (1995), under the heading of Principles of Approach, stated that

> the State is obliged to protect and promote fundamental human
> and civil rights, in accordance with the Constitution, national law
> and relevant International Conventions, including the United Nations
> Convention on the Rights of the Child.
> (Ireland, 1995. p.4)

The United Nations Convention, accepted by Ireland in 1992, stated the rights of children to express their views and to be listened to (UN, 1990, Articles 12 & 13) This coincided with the shift in management style to emphasising collaboration and participation and also a change in classroom methodology from teacher "teaching" from the top of the class to activity learning, negotiated learning and collaborative teaching and learning(O'Gorman. 2000). If teachers were to encourage students to take on responsibility for their own learning, then the logical step must be taken to include students to a greater extent in classroom and management decisions.

Sarason (1995) stated that "the decision-making process should reflect the views of all those who will be affected by the ultimate decision" (Sarason, 1995. p.39). In the same year, Battistich *et al* found that "student outcomes improve when they experience the school as a caring and supportive environment in which they actively participate and have opportunities to exercise influence" (Battistich, 1995. p.649). Newman (1992) spoke of the "culture of inclusion" while Marshall et al (1996) called it the "ethic of care". Zeldin stated his argument for inclusive partnership as follows

> Teacher leaders, parent leaders and student leaders must be
> included in the productive coalition since all members of the
> school community have a part to play in implementing change"
> (Zeldin, 1994. p.155)

Research recommends the inclusion of the student in the decision-making process of schools to a greater degree than is practised at present. Research findings by Smyth, 1999 state that, by so including the students, there is a raising of standards within the school, improved behaviour and better retention rates.

One appropriate way to include students in the decision-making process and to give them a voice in their own education is the setting up and running of a student council in second level schools. Smyth stated that

> The measure of formal pupil involvement reflects the existence of
> student councils or prefect systems within the school.
> (Smyth, 1999. p.36)

She stated unequivocally that pupils do better in schools where they are given positions of responsibility within the school structure (p.53). This inclusion gives them a sense of ownership and control over school life. She recommended that "pupil involvement should be considered as a feature of management and in-service training within schools" (p.221).

(iv) Conclusion

Partnership is the third of the key considerations underpinning Irish education. This research is concerned with the role of the student in such a partnership. It was not until

the Education Act (1998) that the student was accorded his/her rightful place in the partnership, despite the fact that the Irish government accepted the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1992, a document which clearly stated that the child had a right to express his/her views and to have them listened to. Research supports the view that when students' voices are listened to, this results in a raising of standards, improved discipline and better retention rates (Newman, 1992. Zeldin, 1994. Battistich, 1995. Smyth, 1999).

Could a student council be used as one way of including students in the established partnership of school, parents and community? Could the student council be one of the means by which the government could deliver to the student their key consideration of partnership? This research will establish if this might be so.

e) Pluralism

(i) Introduction

The Chambers Dictionary defined pluralism as

> a philosophy that recognises more than one principle of being, a society
> in which different ethnic etc. groups preserve their own customs or hold
> equal power".
>
> (Chambers Dictionary 1994. p.1314-5)

The Oxford Dictionary called pluralism a "system that recognises more than one ultimate principle" (p. 937). This researcher could find no clear definition of pluralism issued by the Department of Education. Indeed, Coolahan commented at a conference on pluralism in 1996 that

> No effort was made to define pluralism in a precise manner, and this
> may have been to the good in an evolving, explorative approach.
> However, by implication, it became clear that pluralism impinged on
> many aspects of human identity and experience. These included issues
> of race, religion, language, culture, age, gender, minorities etc.
>
> (Coolahan, 1996. p.286)

Society, and consequently, education in Ireland has been characterised by its homogeneity. Traditionally Irish education developed along denominational lines at all three levels (Ireland, 1996). With the rising standard of education, the ease of foreign

travel, the flourishing economy, the return of emigrants coupled with immigration and

the fall off in the practice of religion, Irish society has become less homogeneous. Irish

education policy has attempted to reflect this diversity in the many papers, reports and,

ultimately, the Education Act, 1998.

(ii) Legislation

Firstly, this researcher will trace the development of government policy on pluralism

through from the Green Paper (1992) to the Education Act (1998).

The Green Paper (1992) stated that

> respect must also be assured, within the school environment, for the
> wishes of those who do not share the religious beliefs of the majority.
> (Ireland, 1992. p.34)

The Paper went on to express its support for the establishment of multi-denominational

schools on the same terms available to denominational schools. The Paper also made

reference to the acceptance of, and provision for, travellers within our schools (p.54),

students with special needs (p.60) and the importance of gender equality (p.67).

The issue of funding for multi-denominational and other language schools was

highlighted in the Convention report (Coolahan, 1994, chapter 5). It referred to the

emerging pluralist society in Ireland (Coolahan, 1994, p.31).

In the White Paper (1995), a clearer picture of the government's interpretation of the

word "pluralism" emerged. Pluralism was included as one of the key considerations

underpinning policy and practice in Irish education (p.3). It stated that

> most parents avail of denominational education for their children through
> the medium of the English language but others seek alternative schooling
> provision.
> (Ireland, 1995. p.32)

It was the duty of the State, the White Paper stated, to provide such schooling (Ireland,

1995. p.32).

In 1996, an international conference on pluralism in education was held in Maynooth.

Papers were delivered by professionals from South Africa, America, Canada, The

Netherlands, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Various countries explained how their own education system had dealt with the problems of pluralism. All agreed that it was a difficult road to travel, but necessary. No country claimed to have found the total solution but they all felt hopeful that they were on the right path. In the papers from the Republic of Ireland, it was admitted that Ireland was only at the start of the journey. There were many issues yet to be debated and answers would not come easily. In the preamble to the Education Act (1998) it stated that the Act needed to "respect the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society". This is repeated in section15, 2(e).

Two issues have dominated public debate regarding pluralism in Irish education;

> a) funding for schools and
>
> b) protection of the school ethos.

The convention Report highlighted the unequal situation faced by groups of parents who wished to set up either Gaelscoileanna or multi-denominational schools. Denominational schools were treated more favourably. The constitution recognises the parent as the prime educator of the child (article 42) and defends the right of the parent to send the child to the school of their choice (article 42,3,1*). Over the last decade, many parents' groups have banded together to provide the education of their choice for their child in the form of Gaelscoileanna and/or multi-denominational schools, e.g. Educate Together. There was evident discrimination in funding for these schools as reported at the Education Conference, 1993. This matter was corrected in the Education Act, setting the same criteria for funding for all schools and no longer favouring denominational schools (1998).

As stated previously, Irish education developed along denominational lines. By the 1970's, the schools were privately owned but publicly funded (Ireland, 1996). With the

decrease in religious personnel and the rising demand for accountability in the use of

public funds, this situation was challenged by groups like Educate Together.

The government strongly recommended that the religiously owned schools set up

Boards of Management to include representatives of teachers, parents and the local

community (Ireland, 1998, section 14). These schools were predominantly Catholic

schools owned and run by religious communities. The religious communities argued

that they must be allowed to discriminate in favour of maintaining their own religious

ethos in their schools. Others, notably the teachers' unions, replied that that was blatant

discrimination on religious grounds. The religious responded that the constitution

(article 42) allowed parents to choose the school of their choice for their children and

the majority of Irish parents chose denominational schools. Therefore the state must

support the maintaining of these denominational schools. The White Paper stated

> There may also be conflict between the provisions prohibiting
> discrimination on the grounds of religion and the rights of
> denominational schools to preserve a particular denominational
> ethos.
>
> (Ireland, 1995. p.216)

This right of the denominational schools to protect their ethos was upheld in the Irish

courts. Minister O'Donoghue, has been arguing strongly in Europe for the same right.

The matter is ongoing.

(vi) Conclusion.

The implementation of a pluralist policy in Irish education has, so far, been concerned

with issues outside the immediate school environment, e.g. funding from central

government and legal protection of the school ethos. There would appear to be no role

here for a student council. However, within the school community, were the issues of

pluralism to be broadened e.g. to include the celebration of diversity within the school

community itself, then there might be a role for a student council and pluralism.

Student councils, at present, function within a specific school. We have seen, when

discussing equality in education, how research has shown that an effective student

council can help in the struggle against racial discrimination (Trafford, 1997). It was

also shown to help the disabled to find acceptance in mainstream education (Trafford,

1997). Davies (1999) stated that

> ...a school council may be one of the most cost-effective ways of
> developing inclusivity and of recognising pupil potential.
> (Davies, 1999. p.4)

She pointed out that, for the student council to be effective, it must be embedded in a

total school ethos of democracy, equity and concern for pupils and teachers welfare and

performance. OFSTED (Davies, 1999. p.3) stated that student councils played an

important role as agents of change. They may prove to be effective in one small area of

introducing Irish education to the practice of pluralism within our schools and so help

the government to deliver on their policy.

f) Accountability

<u>(i) Introduction</u>

Accountability is the fifth and last of the Key Considerations cited in the White Paper

(1995). The Chambers Dictionary (1994, p.10-11) defines accountable as being "liable

to account, responsible, explicable". To account, it explains, is to "give a reason or

explanation, to answer as someone responsible". Accountability, as one of the key

considerations in education, means that those in authority will be able and willing to

explain and be answerable for all that is carried out under the auspices of the

Department of Education and the school.

Accountability in education was new to Irish public institutions. Prior to the

introduction of the concept, the workings of the Department of Education, the

inspectorate and, even of management within the schools was a closed book as far as the

general public were concerned (ÓBuachalla, 1997). Linden referred to this as the

"secret garden" syndrome. By this he meant that

> there wasn't much information about what was happening in our
> school system. Parents couldn't get information, local governments
> couldn't get information, the national government couldn't get information
> about what was happening, where we were going, what was working and
> what wasn't.
>
> (Linden, 1997. p.1)

Linden maintained that with the introduction of the market mechanisms of "autonomy,

choice and diversity" it became necessary to balance these by ensuring that the

education system was accountable. There followed a debate as to whom the

Department of Education should be accountable. Who were the customers of education,

parents, students or taxpayers (ÓBuachalla, 1997)? It was concluded that all three were

customers of the Department of Education (Ireland, 1995).

This work will look briefly at the issue of accountability in education and at the

literature that connects accountability with the role of students.

(ii) Legislation

The concept of accountability was not emphasised in the Green Paper(1992), although

several of the policies later developed were first put forward in this document. It

suggested the writing of a school plan and a system of appraisal of teaching.

> In consultation with all the interests involved, there will be a need to
> develop nationally agreed procedures, including self-assessment and
> peer review, for the ongoing evaluation of teachers' work, in order to
> identify current and future developmental needs and to make specific
> plans to meet those needs.
>
> (Ireland, 1992. p.169)

It also set out plans for the introduction of a teaching council. It spoke of enlarging and

upgrading the role of the inspectorate to include both inspection of schools and teachers

and suggested a supportive role to schools. While not emphasising accountability, it did

refer to the need for transparency "in all aspects of the operation and performance of the

system" (p.159).

The Convention Report (1994) pointed out that the two roles set out for the inspectorate were contradictory and it requested clarification. The Report saw the suggestions regarding a school plan as "potentially the most important proposal in the Green Paper" (p.55). It went on to add that the school plan should have two parts, a permanent part as suggested in the Green Paper and a development section. The development section would contain the priorities, which the school had identified, and their plans for tackling these areas.

It was the White Paper (1995) that first set out the philosophical basis that was to underpin Irish education. Here (p.3) accountability was identified as one of the key considerations. It set out why education should be accountable; 1) because it was the beneficiary of large amounts of government spending and b) education touched the lives of all children and therefore must be called to account for its actions. The White Paper (1995) stated that education must be accountable to parents, students, and the community and to national and regional authorities. It went on to state that since resources were limited, accountability meant focussing on priorities and getting value for money. This accountability would be achieved through the boards of management, the school plan, the teaching council and a system of school appraisal under the guidance of the inspectorate. The Department of Education itself would also be accountable and transparent by means of an annual report, publication of marking schemes and an appeal system for state examinations (Ireland, 1995).

(iii) Areas of accountability

a) The Inspectorate.

The Education Act (1998) clearly stated the role of the inspectorate (Section 13). It listed, in detail, the many and varied functions of the inspector (section 13 (3-12)). These functions covered the areas of support and advice, evaluation and reporting, research and dissemination.

In their quest for accountability in the UK the Education Reform Act of 1992 set up OFSTED - the Office for Standards in Education. It was a non-ministerial government department independent of the Department for Education. The remit granted to OFSTED was to inspect, report on and improve standards of achievement and quality of education through regular independent inspection, public reporting and informed advice. These proposals, maintained Ó Buachalla (1997,p.58) "changed profoundly the nature of inspection in the UK, gave it an independent role and provided a uniform mechanism for its process". Referring to the Irish system of education, Ó Buachalla stated that

> School inspection and its attendant issues have been among the
> most contentious issues in education policy since the early years
> of the Kildare Place Society and of the Inspectorate which Stanley's
> scheme introduced in 1831.
>
> (Ó Buachalla, 1997. p.58)

He went on to say that

> The close identity of our inspectorate with the departmental
> administrative process and the decision to discontinue the publication
> of inspectoral school reports after 1922 have surrounded the process
> since then with a diminished professional status and a culture of
> administrative secrecy which too often generated teacher hostility and
> the exclusion of any element of public accountability".
>
> (Ó Buachalla, 1997. p.59)

Ó Buachalla insisted that any new system must contain the essential elements of improvement, accountability and standards.

In the light of these comments it was encouraging that the proposals for inspection contained in the White Paper (1995. Chapter 15) elicited the guarded support of the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI). In their response to the White Paper they "noted with approval that the White Paper refers to a system for affirming good teachers, identifying strengths and providing opportunities for personal and professional development" (ASTI, 1996. p.34). They went on to remark that

> by using professionals i.e. the inspectorate, in teacher appraisal,

> that the worst effects of crude mechanisms for the assessment
> of school performance and for the assessment of individual teachers
> which have been adopted in some countries, could be avoided.
>
> (ASTI, 1996. p.50).

The original system of inspection of schools, as set out in the White Paper, was given the title of Whole School Inspection (WSI). There appeared to be a tension between the dual objectives of whole school inspection, namely those of accountability and of school improvement. WSI was modified. The word "inspection" was replaced with that of "evaluation" and became known as whole school evaluation (WSE). The Pilot Project Report (1999) on WSE stated that the nature of evaluation had changed over time so that, since 1996 the aims had changed. By 1999

> the focus of activity has moved decisively in the direction of school
> self-review and of school planning, with the role of the central
> authority being that of validating and supporting the school's internal
> review, as well as maintaining an overview of the functioning of the
> educational system as a whole.
>
> (Ireland, 1999. p.50)

This was a new model of school evaluation based on partnership and co-operative innovation, while still maintaining the ultimate goal of accountability.

b) The School Plan.

The School Plan was to play a major role in school self-review. The idea was first put forward in the Green Paper (1992). It stated that these plans "would follow a common format with respect to both content and presentation which, in all cases, would be modest and functional" (Ireland, 1992. p.159). The reaction of the Convention Conference (1993) to the suggestion in the Green Paper was, generally, supportive. However, it did suggest that the school plan be expanded to include a developmental section. The publication of this section would be restricted lest it be used as "a rigid accountability mechanism for evaluating schools" (Ireland, 1994. p.57). The fear was expressed that, if this section was widely available to the public that it might become a "marketing device" rather than an actual plan.

The suggestions of the Convention Report (1994) were accepted in the White Paper (1995) and, subsequently, became part of the Education Act (1998, Section 21). The school plan is now the pivotal element of School Development Planning and school self-review (Ireland, 1999).

c) The examination system.

One of the first areas of education that was called to account was that of the examination system. Both teachers and parents wanted, among other things, greater transparency regarding the criteria used in awarding marks. In response to this pressure the Department of Education made the marking scheme more widely available. They also issued, promptly, each year, an examination report on the national performance in each subject. An appeal system was set in place for candidates in the Leaving Certificate examination, whereby they could see how their papers were marked. and they could request to have their marks re-evaluated. These procedures (Ireland, 1998, Section 49-53) introduced an element of accountability into the state examination system. However, section 53 gave the minister the right to refuse access to certain information e.g. the examination results of particular schools.

The Irish media requested the results of examinations from the Department of Education in order to publish them nation-wide. The department refused quoting the Education Act.

d) Discipline.

Discipline was another area where the schools were asked to be more transparent. The government introduced a discipline appeal system (Ireland, 1998. Section 28 & 29). Parents, and students over eighteen years, could appeal a decision of school management, firstly to the school principal, then to the Board of Management and lastly to the Department of Education.

e) Teachers.

The White Paper suggested the establishment of a Teaching Council (Ireland, p.135).

Reaction was favourable. The Convention Report stated that

> The general view was that such a Council was timely in Irish
> circumstances and would give the teaching profession a degree
> of control over and responsibility for its own profession and allow
> for its closer engagement in the process of change.
>
> (Ireland, 1994. p. 90)

The White Paper (1995) maintained that the role of the teaching council was to "set and

maintain the highest professional standards in the interests of teachers, students, their

parents and the wider community" (Ireland, 1995. p.136).

The Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland reacted favourably to the proposed

creation of the teaching council. They stated that

> A teaching council is the single most important proposal in this
> section of the White Paper. It is only through the establishment of
> such a Council that teachers will be empowered: that they will be
> enabled to take control of their own profession. They will have an
> effective voice in relation to teacher training, both pre-service and
> in-service. They will be able to establish and maintain professional
> standards.
>
> (ASTI, 1996. p. 35)

(iv) Conclusion.

If the creation of a Teaching Council was welcomed as a means of making teachers

more accountable and to give them a voice in maintaining their own high standards, the

same principle might be applied to students. By giving students a Student Council this

might encourage accountability in students and give students a voice in maintaining

their own high standards. Research such as that of Elton (1989) and Davies (1999) have

clearly shown that when students are given a voice in decision making in their schools,

there are fewer discipline problems and fewer dropouts. The students feel that they

have a measure of control over their own lives in school and they react positively.

In the creation of the school plan (Collins, 1996), it is recommended that if the staff are

to feel a sense of ownership of the plan, then they must be a part of its creation. This

same principle might apply to students. If they have their say in the creation of the school's code of conduct, then they are more likely to identify with its goals and abide by it (Elton, 1989). This principle might apply to all school policies, e.g. homework, uniform. Draft copies of policies are submitted to teachers, parents and other members of the school community. The students could be included in this canvassing of opinions. The student council might be a vehicle for this activity.

This research will seek to establish whether there is a relationship, positive or negative, between consulting with students, listening to their voices and greater accountability within the school.

2.3 Conclusion to literature review.

This chapter started out by outlining recent Irish Education legislation, one part of which recommended that each post primary school should set up a student council (Ireland, 1998. sec. 27). It went on to look at research carried out into the workings of existing student councils in Ireland (Browne 1996, O'Neill 1997, Monahan 1999, Fox 2000) and in the UK (Trafford, 1997 & Davies, 1999). Each researcher showed student councils to be beneficial to students and the school. Some recommended that the student councils needed a clearer definition of their role and training for the task (Browne 1996, O'Neill 1997, Trafford 1997, Fox 2000).

This researcher then went on to set a framework within which the workings of a student council might be judged. For this purpose, the five principles listed by the Department of Education (Ireland, 1995, p.3) as appropriate to underpin future Irish education policy, were chosen, i.e. quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability. The literature review looked at writings in these areas and showed how the Irish government attempted to incorporate each principle into its education policy. From the

literature review on student councils and on the five key considerations, this research

will address the following questions;

- Could the establishment of student councils in second level schools in Ireland help

  to deliver the five key considerations?

- Do teachers perceive that a student council could impact positively on quality,

  equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability in the school?

- Are those student councils already in operation in second level schools perceived to

  be delivering on the key considerations?

- Do students perceive that these principles could/are being delivered through their

  student councils?

- What are perceived to be the essential components of a student council.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Research

a) Research Question.

The primary objective of this research is to ascertain if teachers believe that the setting up and running of student councils in Irish post primary schools supports the five key considerations of quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability which the Government asserts underpin educational policy and practice in Ireland (Ireland.1995. p3). The subsidiary objectives are:

- To determine the number of post primary schools, within the chosen area, with established student councils

- To ascertain if there is any relationship between schools with and schools without an established student council

- To estimate the match between teachers' perceptions of the functioning of the "ideal" student council and the "real" student council

- To document the opinions of students regarding student councils

- To record the essential elements, as seen by teachers and students, of a student council.

b) Research

The above objectives necessitated both a quantitative and a qualitative approach to data collection. Three forms of data were thought necessary to address the issues.

In the first place, it was necessary to obtain information from the post primary schools in the designated area regarding their experiences of student councils; e.g., did they have a student council and how long had it been running? Secondly, data were required in order to evaluate the perceptions of teachers as to whether student councils could and/or did support the key

considerations of quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability. Finally, this

researcher wished to afford the teachers an opportunity to express their own views on the workings

of, and possibilities for, student councils.

This researcher was also of the opinion that the views of students needed to be heard. They, too,

were given the opportunity to contribute to the research.

c) Reliability

Bryman & Cramer state that reliability is

> ... the indication of the degree to which an instrument performs consistently
> both for the subjects being assessed and in the differing situations under
> which the measurement is made.
>
> (Bryman & Cramer, 1979. p175)

Kumar states that " the greater the degree of consistency and stability in an instrument, the greater is

its reliability" (Kumar, 1999. p140).

A research instrument needs both internal and external reliability. External reliability refers to the

conditions under which the instrument is administered. Repeating the test at intervals and judging

the consistency of the results can assess it.

Internal reliability deals with the ability of the instrument to produce consistent results. There are

several ways of testing for internal reliability, such as using alternate forms and the split-half

method. The extent of similarity of scores is assessed using correlation. There can be a positive or

a negative correlation.

Item analysis is another method of testing for reliability. Using Cronbach's Alpha test, a judgement

is made regarding the consistency of people's responses to each item on a test. This consistency can

be judged between items and also between responses on individual items and the overall response.

The test is assessed as unreliable and of low value if there is a wide variety in the consistency of the

responses. It is possible to test individual items for their consistency and to eliminate the items

showing low consistency thus raising the reliability rating of the remaining items and of the test

itself. But, it must be remembered that eliminating items of low discrimination can result in a test that does not contain the range of contents that was originally envisaged.

d) Validity

It is possible to produce a perfectly reliable instrument that is not valid. A test is valid when it tests what it claims to test. There are several types of validity; face validity, content validity, construct validity, concurrent validity, respondent validity and predictive validity. Face validity refers to the extent to which the validity is self-evident. The statements must have a logical link with the main issue under study. Content validity refers to the adequacy of the range of items remaining after the elimination of unreliable items. Construct validity examines the fit between the chosen items in a test and the concept that is being tested. Coolican asserts that

> If a construct is sound then it should be possible to support the argument for its existence with a variety of measures of its effect on, or relationship with, other variables.
>
> (Coolican, 1999. p174)

Concurrent validity is tested by how well an instrument compares with a second assessment done concurrently. To test respondent validity the researcher must go back to the original respondents to check out data. Predictive validity refers to how accurate an instrument predicts the outcome expected.

e) Triangulation

Triangulation is a method of confirming one view by employing different methodologies. Different perspectives on an issue can be sought and compared. If two methodologies produce the same results then this confirms the findings. Researchers, however, are not always seeking to identify similar views but, rather, are searching out diverse views. On occasion, the unusual perspective may be of more value to the researcher than the common view. Coolican (1999, p.470) maintains that triangulation is not a valid instrument when it seeks diverse views. He refers to Silverman, (1993), Smith, (1996), Pidgeon & Henwood, (1997), who have expressed similar opinions.

3.2 Methodology

a) Survey

The primary methodology chosen for this study was a survey in the form of a postal questionnaire.

Blaxter, Hughes & Tight describe such a task as

> The method of collecting information by asking a set of preformulated
> questions in a predetermined sequence in a structured questionnaire to a
> sample of individuals drawn so as to be representative of a defined population.
> (1996, p.70)

The advantages of such a methodology are that it is cheap, convenient, within the scope of a lone

researcher and can afford a wealth of data. The disadvantages are that there is no interaction

between the researcher and the respondent. There is no opportunity to elaborate on or explain

questions or statements. There is also no scope for the "unusual" response.

Postal questionnaires are used widely and so can be treated casually by respondents. This may

result in a low response rate. Cohen & Manion (1998, p.98) state that a 40% rate is usual.

Questionnaires can be biased in so far as those who respond may have a particular interest in the

issue under review, while those who do not answer have negative views on the issue. This

difficulty may influence the results of a small survey.

Ninety-one postal questionnaires were distributed. Sixty-eight were returned. This gives a

percentage return of 75%. Of these three were not useable in the calculations, as respondents did

not follow the instructions and completed only the first three questions. As Cohen & Manion

(1998, p.98) stated that a 40% response rate is "usual", a response rate of 75% can be considered an

acceptable sample.

Table 1: Response to postal questionnaire

Distributed	91	100%
Returned	68	75%
Spoiled	3	3%
Useable responses	65	71%

Calculated to the nearest decimal point.

The research also includes a questionnaire to students. This is simpler and shorter than the main questionnaire. It is also anonymous, whereas the main questionnaire is confidential.

b) Interviews

The requirements for triangulation are fulfilled in the form of a small number of in-depth interviews. Blaxter, Hughes & Tight state that

> You may follow up a survey with some interviews in order to get a more detailed perspective on some of the issues raised. The telling anecdote may be much more revealing and influential than almost any amount of figures.
>
> (1996, p.77)

Interviews demand a high level of interpersonal skills if they are to be of benefit to the researcher. They can produce a multiplicity of data on the issues under consideration. However, the researcher can experience difficulties in locating willing respondents. Kumar (1999) maintains that the interview is much more suitable than a questionnaire for dealing with complex questions. Interviews can range in structure from completely structured to completely unstructured. This researcher views the structured interview as little more than a questionnaire and believes that it would add little of value to this work. An unstructured interview requires great expertise of the interviewer for it to contribute to specific research questions. It is also extremely time consuming and difficult to analyse. This researcher decided to use the semi-structured interview. Using this method, the interviewer approached the interviewee with a list of topics that were discussed. This afforded the researcher data on the topics under research and the interviewee the opportunity to express himself/herself freely on the issues. Cohen & Manion referred to this type of interview as a focussed interview. They state that such interviews focus

> On a respondent's subjective responses to a known situation in which she has been involved and which has been analysed by the interviewer prior to the interview.
>
> (Cohen & Manion, 1998, p.273)

Oppenheim (1999) warns against bias on the part of the interviewer when he advocates that we strive towards obtaining data that are "uncontaminated" by the interviewing process. Yet he goes on to state that

> This aim has been attacked as wrong-headed in principle, as well as unattainable in practice, and as denying the "reality of the situation" while indulging in a positivist fallacy and misrepresenting the basically interactive character of the data being collected.
>
> (Oppennheim, 1999, p.86)

Bell (1999, p.87) recommends that, since we cannot eliminate bias, it is best to acknowledge it and move on.

Oppenheim (1999) recommends rigid standardisation of the interview in order to limit systemic errors. He reminds us that we are in debt to our interviewees and that the basic rule is that no harm comes to the respondent as a result of participating in the research. Coolican (1999) warns that reliability may suffer in the semi-structured interview but that the interview can yield "rich data". He also points out that the generalisability of the responses is weak as there is greater opportunity for researcher influence and selectivity.

A tape recorder was used as an aid to memory but the entire interview was not required to be transcribed as in the structured interview.

One advantage of interviews for this researcher was their ability to convey a sense of support or otherwise for student councils. It is also possible in such a situation to enlarge on or clarify areas of confusion. Kumar (1999) refers to this as the flexibility of this type of interview. But warns that if

> .... an interview guide does not list specific questions to be asked of respondents, the comparability of questions asked and responses obtained may become a problem.
>
> (Kumar, 1999, p.109)

3.3 This research

a) Questionnaire

This questionnaire was divided into three sections, each dealing with different types of data as follows:

- Factual information

- Attitude scales

- Open questions

Part 1 contained the factual questions about student councils. Oppenheim (1999) suggests that one should ask for this biographical information at the end of the questionnaire. He fears that the respondent will find the questionnaire "boring" if it starts with such questions and might lose interest. However, this researcher felt that this questionnaire contained a deliberate sequence of information seeking and, since the second part of the questionnaire demanded serious thought, it was better to start off with the easy questions. Coolican (1999 p156) maintains that factual questions usually have face validity.

Part 2 was divided into five sections, each dealing with one of the key considerations of quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability. The format used here was that of a Likert scale which was used to measure the strength of agreement or disagreement of the respondents with each statement on a five-point range. The answers were then scored and a measure of the respondents' feelings was produced. Bell (1999 p.185) states that "The most straightforward attitude scale is probably the Likert." This section dealt with attitudes towards both the ideal student council and the reality of the student council in the respondent's school. Kumar (1999) advises us to make sure that the statements on the various aspects have a logical link with the main issue under study in order to safeguard validity. His advice is followed in part 2 of this questionnaire.

Finally, part 3 gave the respondents the opportunity to express their own views in open questions. Oppenheim (1999), Cohen & Manion (1998) and Bell (1998) all advocate the use of open questions in a questionnaire. It offers the respondents the opportunity to express their own opinions freely and to point out issues that they may feel are important and have been overlooked by the researcher. Cohen & Manion (1998, p105) suggest that respondents prefer "challenging" questions rather than have the subject "trivialised".

b) Size of the study

After consulting the Department's publication, *List of Post Primary Schools, 1999-2000* (Ireland, 2000), it was decided to include in the survey all the post primary schools in the county and borough of Cork. This amounted to 91 schools; 52 were Voluntary Secondary Schools, 28 were Vocational and Community Colleges and 11 were Community and Comprehensive Schools. Sixty-eight responded.

c) Postal Questionnaire

The postal questionnaire was addressed to the teacher co-ordinator of the student council or the Deputy Principal of each school. Cohen and Manion suggest that three reminders be sent out to the respondents over a period of time following the first contact. They state that this can raise the response rate by as much as thirty per cent (Cohen & Manion, 1999, p.99). Consequently, I followed the first questionnaire with two reminders, a second copy of the questionnaire and a second stamped addressed envelope.

d) Identification.

In order to be able to follow up on the questionnaires it was necessary to be able to identify each questionnaire and from which school it was sent. This was done by means of a number on the top of each questionnaire. The schools were assured that their answers were confidential. Only the researcher herself had the identification list. The completed questionnaires were also used to identify possible schools for interviews.

e) Timing.

The questionnaires were posted at the end of September, 2001. At that time teachers were over the initial stress of the new academic year but were fresh enough and enthusiastic enough to fill out the questionnaire. By that time, too, they had completed the election of the new student council. A return date was typed at the end of each questionnaire.

Approximately two weeks after that date, the first reminder was sent out. This was a one-page

letter. The third reminder, a second copy of the questionnaire and a second stamped addressed envelope was posted to arrive in the schools in early November, 2001.

f) Accompanying Letter

The accompanying letter explained that the questionnaire was a vital part of this researcher's work on student councils in the Cork area.

> The purpose of the covering letter is to indicate the aim of the
> survey, to convey to respondents its importance, to assure them
> of confidentiality, and to encourage their replies.
> (Cohen & Manion, 1998, p.97)

The letter also stated that it would take at most thirty minutes to complete the questionnaire.

g) Pilot.

In the spring of 2001, a draft questionnaire was given to fifteen members of staff in a Voluntary Secondary school in Cork City. Twelve completed and returned it. A database was set up using the SPSS statistics package. From these initial results, using Cronbach's Alpha reliability test and the respondents' comments, a second questionnaire was assembled and posted in May 2001 to fifteen second level schools in County Cork. Eleven responded. Cronbach's Alpha reliability test was again applied to the items in the instrument and those of low reliability were eliminated, leaving six items out of the original fifteen for each of the five key consideration of quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability, in the questionnaire. After the second pilot, several items in Part 1 were expanded to cater for a variety of answers and not confine the respondent to a simple yes/no answer. One more open question was added to Part 3 at the suggestion of one respondent.

h) Layout.

The layout of part 1 followed that recommended by Cohen & Manion (1998), Oppenheim (1999) and Bell (1999) in that instructions and the scoring code were typed at the top of each page. There was an introductory paragraph explaining the purpose of the research.

The layout of Part 2 was taken from the one used in Ramsay, W. & Clark, E., *New Ideas for Effective School Improvement*, p.235. The statements were typed down the centre of the page. On either side were the numbers 1 to 5, which represented degrees of agreement or disagreement with

the descriptives. Those on the left of the page scored the level at which the respondent believed a student council in a school could deliver the statement. The numbers on the right of the page represented the level at which the respondent believed the student council in their school was actually delivering that concept   Part 3 allowed several typed lines free for the respondents' answers to the open questions. A brief note at the end of the questionnaire solicited an early return of the completed questionnaire and thanked the respondents for their participation. A date of return, two weeks later, was added, naming the day and the date. A stamped addressed envelope was enclosed with each questionnaire.

i) Student Input.

The pilot survey showed a weakness in that only the views of teachers were solicited. This researcher deemed it necessary to seek also the opinions of students. A shortened questionnaire of approximately thirty items was piloted on a mixed group of second and fifth year students (approximate ages of 14 and 16 years). Again Cronbach's Alpha reliability test was used to analyse these items. They were then put into groups corresponding to the five key considerations. The scale for the items was reduced to four, omitting the central number, thus forcing the students to choose to be either positive or negative. This was done as a result of the high number of students in the pilot who choose the central number. The open questions were increased to two and were worded in such a way as to make the conclusions more clear-cut. It was deduced from the pilot that fifth year students (approx. 17 years) provided more mature and experienced answers to the questions and so the final student questionnaire was administered to that group only. The survey included approximately thirty students from each of the schools in which the teacher co-ordinator of the student council agreed to an interview. This eased the administration and return of the student questionnaires. Anonymity was promised and a stamped addressed envelope was provided.

j) Interviews

Interviews were used :

- As a method of triangulation.

- To accumulate further information on the workings of student councils in Cork schools and

- So that the researcher could get a sense of support or otherwise for student councils.

The following factors influenced the choice of school for interview;

- The size of school

- The type of school

- The gender of the pupils

- The willingness of the teacher co-ordinator to be interviewed

- The years in existence of the student council in the school

- The distance of the school from Cork city.

The schools involved in the postal survey were divided into three size categories in line with Hannon's 1996 publication where less than 300 pupils represented a small school, 300 to 499 pupils constituted a medium school and more than 500 pupils was a large school. The number and gender of pupils in each school was in the Government's List of Post Primary Schools (1999-2000). This publication also listed the type of school, e.g., Voluntary Secondary, Vocational Schools and Community Colleges and Community and Comprehensive Schools.

Efforts were made to include representatives of as many types, size and gender of schools as possible in the interview schedule. Owing to end of year pressures on teachers, it was quite difficult to get seven interviews.

The areas of particular interest which emerged from the postal survey were as follows:

- The five areas of the key considerations: quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability,

- The nature of a successful student council,

- The gap between the functioning of the ideal student council and the actual level,

- The chief obstacles to and supports for a successful student council.

This list was the basis for the interview guide.

Pilot interviews were conducted among colleagues. The interview guide listed the proposed questions and was given to the interviewees prior to the interview. The purpose of this was to allow the interviewees to think about their opinions and organise their thoughts before the interview. It was also done so that the interviewees would be at ease during the interview itself.

Several changes were made to the interview guide as a result of the pilot. Questions were rephrased or excluded to give a more objective approach to the interview, to afford the interviewee clearer guidelines and a sharper focus on the main objectives of the research. The final interview guide contained eleven questions. To strengthen the reliability of the interviews each interviewee was asked the same questions, in the same order. A copy of the interview schedule was sent to each interviewee before the interview. A summary of what was said was sent after the interview. The interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on opinions and to back them up with specific instances.

The accompanying letter was also redrafted on the advice of the pilot interviewees. It was felt that the interviewees needed reminding about the questionnaire that they had completed the previous October and of the main objectives of the research.

Phone calls were made to possible respondents and followed up with a letter outlining the objectives of the research, a copy of the interview guide and a possible date and time for the interview. Another phone call confirmed the arrangements. The interview took place at a venue chosen by the interviewee.

The researcher used a tape recorder, with the permission of the interviewee, as an aid to memory. This enabled the interviewer to concentrate on the interview itself. Seven schools agreed to an interview. These were conducted with the teacher co-ordinator of the student council in five of the schools, the CSPE teacher in one school and with the Deputy Principal in the seventh school. There

was no student council in the last school but the Deputy Principal planned to set one up in September, 2002. He was very anxious to take part in the research. As interviews were generally carried out during a free period of the interviewee, there was pressure to complete within the time allowed (approximately 30 minutes per interview). They were also held in an empty classroom while normal school activities continued. Thus there were often interruptions and constant noise.

k) Student Questionnaire

Thirty copies of the student questionnaire were sent to each interviewee with the interview guide. The interviewee was asked to administer these to a group of fifth year students within the school and, if possible, to have them completed before the interview itself. That made a total of 210 of which 171 were returned completed.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 The Questionnaire

a) Part 1, Introduction

Part 1 of the questionnaire contained 54 questions in total and provided a wealth of data. Owing to restrictions on size in this research, it was necessary to confine the analysis of the results to those questions that were found to be most directly relevant to the research question. School size, school category, gender of pupils and the length of standing of the student council were questions from part 1 of the questionnaire deemed to belong to this group. The analysis of these questions was as follows:

Table 2: School category and total number of respondents

School category	Voluntary Secondary Schools		Comprehensive/ Community Schools		V.E.C. Schools	
Respondents=65	36	55%	9	14%	20	31%
Total number=91	52	57%	11	12%	28	31%

Table 3: School size and total number of respondents

School size	Small (< 300 pupils)		Medium (300-499 pupils)		Large (> 500 pupils)	
Respondents=65	12	19%	30	46%	23	35%
Total schools in Cork=91	15	16%	40	44%	36	40%

Table 4: Gender of pupils in the schools and total number of respondents

Gender	All girls		All boys		mixed	
Respondents=65	17	26%	12	19%	36	55%
Total schools in Cork=91	21	23%	17	19%	53	58%

As can be seen from these tables, the percentages within each group that responded to the questionnaire, (school size, school category and school gender) correspond closely with the percentages of the total number of post primary schools in the county of Cork. This reflects the representative nature of the findings of this research.

b) Part 1, Findings

Part 1 of the postal questionnaire solicited primarily biographical information. Of the 65 respondent schools, 43 had a student council and 22 did not. This gave a percentage of 66% of schools with, and 34% of schools without, a student council, a ratio of 2:1. These figures can be further analysed to show the percentage of schools with a student council by school category, school size and school gender.

Table 5; "Does your school have a student council?" Response by school category

	Voluntary Secondary Schools		Comprehensive/Community Schools		V.E.C. Schools	
With student councils	24	66%	7	78%	12	60%
Without student councils	12	34%	2	22%	8	40%
Total respondents=65	36	100%	9	100%	20	100%

Table 6; "Does your school have a student council?" Response by school size.

	small		medium		large	
With councils	4	33%	20	67%	19	83%
Without councils	8	67%	10	33%	4	17%
Respondents=65	12	100%	30	100%	23	100%

Table 7; "Does your school have a student council?" Response by gender

	All girls		All boys		mixed	
With councils	10	59%	8	67%	25	69%
Without councils	7	41%	4	33%	11	31%
Respondents=65	17	100%	12	100%	36	100%

Table 5 shows that the Comprehensive/Community Schools category has the highest percentage of schools with a student council (78%). The Voluntary Secondary Schools are next with 66% with a student council. The V.E.C. schools come last on the table with a 60% rate. This does not hold any surprises, as one would expect the more modern schools, the community and comprehensive schools, to be more in tune with the modern trends in education of equality and partnership. School size is clearly a factor in the likelihood of a school having a student council. The larger schools have the highest percentage of student councils (83%). The figure for small schools not having a student council, 67%, is worth noting and is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (Pearson correlation, p=.002). This could be accounted for by the fact that the small schools are more likely to be long established schools built on the pyramid style of management, either voluntary secondary and so more likely to be single sexed schools, or vocational. They are also more likely to be situated in a rural setting.

Table 7 indicates that mixed schools have the highest percentage (69%) of student councils, with the all girls' schools having the least (59%).

Question 4 of the postal questionnaire asked how long the student council had been in existence in each school. Table 8 shows the tabulated results.

Table 8: Years that the student council has been in existence. Total respondents.

		Frequency	Percent
Student council	1 year	11	16.9
	2 years	5	7.7
	3 years	7	10.8
	4 years	5	7.7
	5 years	5	7.7
	5-9 years	5	7.7
	over 10 years	5	7.7
	Total	43	66.2
No student council		22	33.8
Total		65	100.0

Those student councils (23 or 35.4%) established over the last 3 years were set up in response to the Education Act. The missing 22 (or 33.8%,) have yet to set up their

councils. A total of 20 schools, or 30.8%, had set up their councils prior to the

publication of the Education Act in 1998.

Table 9: Years of student council in existence, by school category.

Years	Voluntary Secondary-Religious principal	Voluntary Secondary-lay principal	Comprehensive Schools	Community Schools	Community Colleges	Vocational Schools
1 year	1	5	1	2	0	2
2 years	1	3	0	0	1	0
3 years	1	3	0	2	0	1
4 years	0	2	0	0	2	1
5 years	1	1	0	0	1	2
5-9 years	0	2	0	1	1	1
Over 10 years	2	2	1	0	0	0
Total	6	18	2	5	5	7
No student council	1	11	1	1	2	6

Table 9 shows that the highest scores are in the category "Voluntary secondary-lay

principal". It should be remembered that this was the position when the survey was

carried out. It cannot be assumed that the lay principal had been in place over the

previous fifteen years. However, the next highest scoring category is that of voluntary

secondary-religious principal. It would seem that voluntary secondary schools with lay

or religious principals have the longest history of student councils. The Comprehensive

and Community schools, although they have the highest percentage of respondent

schools with a student council, do not have a long history of council activity. This may

be a reflection of the age of the different types of school.

Table 10: Years that the student council has been in existence, by school size.

Years	Small schools	Medium schools	Large schools
1 year	4	3	6
2 years	0	2	3
3 years	0	5	3
4 years	0	4	1
5 years	0	0	2
5-9 years	0	3	3
Over 10 years	0	3	1
Total	4	20	19
No student council	8	10	4

Table 10 highlights the position of the small school in relation to having a student

council. Eight of the small schools that responded to the postal questionnaire did not

have a student council and the 4 that did have a council only established that council in

the year 2000, two years after the publication of the Education Act. The medium-sized

school is equally represented in each group (those without a student council, those who

established the council as a result of the Education Act and those who had their councils

before the publication of the Act). The large school is most heavily represented in the

group that established their councils on foot of the Education Act.

Table 11: Years that the student council has been in existence. By gender.

Years	All girls schools	All boys schools	Mixed schools
1 year	3	3	5
2 years	2	0	3
3 years	1	2	4
4 years	0	1	4
5 years	1	0	4
5-9 years	0	1	4
Over 10 years	3	1	1
Total	10	8	25
No student council	7	4	11

Analyzing the longevity of the student councils by school gender we see that the

greatest number (23) falls within the middle category, those schools that set up the

council as a result of the Education Act. 22 have no student council and 20 have had

their councils since before the Education Act.

At the conclusion of part 1 of the survey several questions requested the respondents to

record their perceptions of staff attitudes to the student council. This data is recorded in

the form of graphs that are included in the appendices.

In graph 1 (appendix 7) the responses of staff on their perceptions of student councils

are indicated. This shows that almost half (46.1%) of the staffs were thought to be

supportive of the student council. When school category, size and gender analyzed

these figures, it was found that the most supportive staff was that of the voluntary

secondary school with a lay principal, the large school and the school of mixed gender.

Similarly, graph 2 (appendix 7) shows that very high percentages (63.1%) of principals were thought to support the student councils. This is most evident in the large mixed school.

Graph 3 (appendix 7) shows that a small number of student councils (4.6%) are believed to be "struggling" and 27.7% "finding its feet", 12% are well established and the support for 15.4% of the councils varies from year to year.

c) Part 1, Conclusion

- Two out of three of the respondent schools have a student council.

- The school most likely to have a student council belongs in the category of the Community/Comprehensive, large school with a mixed gender population.

- The school least likely to have a student council belongs in the category of the vocational, small, all girls' school.

- The characteristics of the school with the longest serving student council are those of a Voluntary Secondary, medium, all girls' school with a lay principal.

- The attitudes of staff and principals, as perceived by the respondents, are positive.

- A low percentage (4.6%) of the student councils was thought to be "struggling".

d) Part 2, Introduction

Part 2 of the questionnaire sought the opinions of the respondents. A Likert type format was used. The statements were grouped under the headings of the five key considerations, equality, quality, partnership, pluralism and accountability. The respondents were asked to score each consideration twice. On the left of the page they recorded their evaluation of the contribution of that statement in an ideal situation and on the right the actual score they would give to the performance of their own student council in their own school. The respondents in schools without a student council were asked to complete the left column only.

e) Part 2, Findings

(i) Reliability

Table 12, Reliability test results-Key Considerations.

Key Considerations	Respondents	Items	Alpha
Equality – ideal	60	6	.6415
– actual	40	6	.5554
Quality - ideal	62	6	.7063
– actual	41	6	.7552
Partnership – ideal	62	6	.7120
– actual	41	6	.6620
Pluralism – ideal	60	6	.8147
– actual	41	6	.8072
Accountability – ideal	59	6	.7999
– actual	40	6	.8053

Cronbach's Alpha test was used to check the reliability of the groups of six items under each of the five key considerations (Table 12). When the items for all five key considerations were combined the Alpha score was .8063. This shows a very high degree of reliability. The groups of six items under each of the five considerations were then combined and their reliability checked. The results were as follows

Table 13; Reliability test results for combined Key Considerations

Combined key considerations	Respondents	Items	Alpha
Key Considerations - ideal	58	5	.7920
Key Considerations - actual	40	5	.7004
Key Considerations – ideal & actual	40	10	.8232

These Alpha scores are very good and so show a high degree of reliability for the descriptives, individually and combined, used in this research.

(ii) Positive/Negative alignment

Graphs 4 & 5 (appendix 8) show the distribution of the scores awarded to the combined items for the five key considerations, equality, quality, partnership, pluralism and accountability. The mid-point on the graph falls at 90[1]. The figures to the left of the mid-point records a negative score, the scores to the right of the mid-point record a

positive score. Graphs 4 & 5 both show a positive score; the perception of the ideal situation is extremely positive while that for the actual situation is also tilted towards the positive (29 schools scored to the left and 32 to the right). These results, therefore, indicate that the teachers, overall, perceived, both in the ideal situation and the actual situation, that a student council can and is helping to deliver the five key considerations of equality, quality, partnership, pluralism and accountability.

Each of the key considerations (equality, quality, partnership, pluralism & accountability) has been analysed separately in two graphs. The first records the scores by the teachers for an ideal student council. The second is awarded for the actual performance of the student council in that school. The figures for respondents and missing data are not consistent across all the graphs. In some cases, the respondents missed out some of the questions. The differences in the numbers of missing data between the ideal and the actual graphs causes the different scales used on the vertical axis.

Looking at the five graphs for the ideal student councils, (graphs 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, appendix 9) we see that the teachers' perceptions of the possibility of the student councils delivering the key considerations is extremely positive although the practice in schools is not regarded as positively. Teachers record that the student councils in their school are delivering equality, quality and accountability, but are not delivering partnership and pluralism. The mean scores support this.

Table 14; Mean scores-Key Considerations.

	Mean score	Respondents	Items	Positive/Negative
Combined Key Considerations-ideal	116.6290	62	30	Positive
-actual	76.0164	61	30	Negative
Equality-ideal	21.9000	60	6	Positive
-actual	18.8780	41	6	Positive
Quality-ideal	24.5968	62	6	Positive
-actual	22.4524	42	6	Positive
Partnership-ideal	21.1935	62	6	Positive

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[1] Subtract the minimum score (30) from the maximum score (150), divide that by 2 and then add the minimum score again.

-actual	17.5476	42	6	Negative
Pluralism-ideal	26.4098	61	6	Positive
-actual	17.4634	41	6	Negative
Accountability-ideal	24.4500	60	6	Positive
-actual	20.5122	41	6	Positive

The mean scores confirm the previous positive/negative orientation of the scoring for the key considerations except in the case of the combined key considerations-actual. The mean score would place this descriptive in the negative results, yet, on closer inspection, 29 schools scored this variable negatively and 32 positively. This indicates that, while more schools are positive in their perceptions, the schools that are negative are extremely so.

The greatest variance between the scores awarded in the ideal situation and the actual situation lies with the key consideration of Pluralism. This is explained to some extent in the interviews, where teachers admitted to a lack of a clear understanding of the concept and yet declared a belief that education could help to deliver it (see page 116).

Table 15; Differences in mean scores-Key Considerations.

Key Considerations	Differences
Equality	3.0220
Quality	2.1444
Partnership	4.6459
Pluralism	8.9464
Accountability	3.9378

(iii) Quality

The Apha for the combined six items under Quality-ideal is .7063. The mean Apha for the individual items is .7359. These scores show a high degree of reliability.

The mid-point in the scale is 3. (values; 1=not at all, 2=not well, 3=uncertain, 4=fairly well and 5=very well). The mean score is 4.0484. Therefore the result lies on the positive side. This result is confirmed by the area graphs (graphs 16-21, appendix 10) for each of the six descriptives.

The alpha for the combined items under Quality-actual is .7552. The mean Alpha for individual items is .7696. These scores show a high degree of reliability.

The mid-point on the scale is 3. The mean score is 3.7805. Therefore the result for Quality-actual is positive. This result is confirmed by the area graphs (graphs 22-27, appendix 11). There is a difference between the mean score for the ideal student council and the actual student council of .2679. This would indicate that teachers' perceptions of the achievements of the ideal and the actual student councils in the area of quality deliverance are quite close. This positive perception will be investigated later in the interviews with teachers.

(iv) Partnership

When we look at one of the key considerations which gave a negative result, partnership-actual, we see that the Alpha for the combined items was .6620 and for the individual items, .6684. This is a high level of reliability.

The mean scores for the combined items was 17.7561 (The mid-point was 18) and for the individual items was 2.9593 (The mid-point was 3).

The scores for the individual items under Partnership-actual were very revealing. Only two descriptives scored negatively. They were, "The student council has a representative at staff meetings" and "The student council has a representative at Board of Management meetings." The mean scores for these were 1.4048 and 1.4762. 35 (53.8%) schools awarded "not at all" for the former descriptive and 32 (49.2%) schools for the latter descriptive. These two issues skewed the result negatively. These results show clearly that student councils do not have representatives at either staff or Board meetings.

The picture changes little when we look at these same descriptives under the heading of Partnership-ideal (mean scores 1.4048 and 1.4762). This demonstrated clearly that teachers do not want students present at staff and board meetings.

(v) Pluralism

When we look more closely at the other negative result, Pluralism-actual, we see that the Alpha score for the combined items was .8072 and for the items, .8016. This is a very high degree of reliability.

The mean score for the combined descriptives was 17.4634 (mid-point=18) and for the individual items, the mean score was 2.9106 (mid-point=3).

Looking at the mean scores for the items separately we see that four descriptives scored negatively; item (1)"Pupils understand pluralism in education" (2.1707), item (2)"The student council celebrates diversity within the school"(2.0732), item (3)"The student council engages in the exchange of ideas with schools of other denominations"(2.7805), and item (4)"The student council supports minorities within the school community"(2.9756).

Looking at these same descriptives under Pluralism-ideal we see that (1) was awarded "not at all" by 14 (21.5%) schools, (2) by 6 (9.2%) schools, (3) by 20 (30.8%) schools and (4) by 5(7.7%) schools. The first and third descriptives are very negative indeed. These issues were highlighted during the interviews.

f) Part 2, Conclusions

- The reliability for the combined and individual items in the questionnaire is high.

- Teachers believe that a student council can and is delivering three of the five key considerations; equality, quality and accountability.

- Teachers believe that a student council can deliver partnership and pluralism but is not doing so at present.

- Student representation at staff and Board of Management meetings is an issue for teachers. They appeared not in favour.

- Teachers believe that students do not understand the concept of "pluralism in education".

- Teachers believe that the student councils in schools at present are not involved in the exchange of ideas with schools of other denominations.

g) Part 3, Introduction

The final part of the questionnaire contained open questions. Eleven respondents did not complete this section. Others filled in some of the open questions and left others blank.

The open questions were not classified under the headings of the five Key Considerations as it was felt that to do so might introduce an element of boredom for the respondent. However, the replies are categorised broadly into these areas.

h) Part 3, Findings

Improving the quality of education can be inferred from the references to the need for training for both staff and students in order for a student council to function effectively. Such training would facilitate the development of organisational skills such as "holding regular meetings" and "being capable of co-operative enterprise". It would identify leadership qualities and give those individuals a platform on which to develop. A student council, it was stated, would encourage commitment and enthusiasm among the student body. It would also provide an opportunity for students to develop their negotiating skills and to experience the necessity for compromise.

Equality was a recurring issue throughout the responses to the open questions. Respondents stated that the council members must be "truly" or "fairly" representative of the "whole" student body. Some respondents emphasised the importance of gender balance, others age or academic balance.

References to partnership were sparse. Respondents used words like "student contribution" or "realistic input" rather than "partner". One respondent stated that he hoped that this would "evolve into partnership".

Respondents chose not to include references to pluralism in this section of the survey.

Accountability, however, did receive attention. Transparent procedures ranked highly on the list of essential elements of a student council. Respondents wanted the council to be open to ongoing review of its role and procedures "in the light of changing student needs". Usually the word "accountability" was listed on its own but a number of teachers listed the areas where they wanted the council to be accountable i.e. minutes, funds, topics discussed. Another stated that the council "must be accountable for its decisions".

i) Part 3, Conclusions

- The most important element of a student council, as perceived by respondents, was that the council be truly representative of the whole student body.

- Training of staff and students is perceived to be essential.

- There should be transparency and clarity of purpose in the activities of the council.

- The council should have a written constitution, a clear, student friendly structure, meet often, be capable of teamwork and be responsible for their decisions and actions.

4.2) Interviews

a) Introduction

Table 16; Schools interviewed.

school	Type	Size	Gender	Age of student council	Urban/Rural
1	Voluntary Secondary School	Medium	Girls	Over 10 years	Urban
2	Community School	Large	Boys	3 years	Urban
3	Voluntary Secondary School	Medium	Boys	Over 10 years	Urban
4	V.E.C. School	Medium	Mixed	No council	Rural
5	V.E.C. School	Medium	Mixed	4 years	Rural
6	Community School	Large	Mixed	1 year	Rural
7	Voluntary Secondary School	Large	Girls	5-9 years	Urban

Owing to end of year pressures it was difficult to persuade teachers to agree to an interview. However, seven schools agreed to an interview (Table 16).

b) Findings of interviews

The first question asked what was the role of the interviewee with regard to the student council and how long they had been involved. The CSPE teacher was particularly interested in the activities of the student council as she viewed it as "democracy in action" in the school.

> "I'm constantly advising them, if they want to do something, use the right procedures and not be knocking all the time, but to come up with alternatives". (School 1)

She said that she tells the students "This is where your voice is, there is a procedure and I tell them how to go about it" (School 1). She personally supported the idea of a council and encouraged the students to address their issues through the council, "you have a direct say into your community, which happens to be your student council. Use it." (School 1). She, her class and the council worked together in formulating and executing the Junior Certificate class's action project.

The Deputy Principal interviewed had no student council in his school but he planned to introduce a council in the Autumn of 2002. He saw a council as a natural progression in school partnership, "As school planning develops, so will the involvement of students through student councils" (School 4). The four council co-ordinators had all been involved with their school councils for between one and five years. One was about to hand over the responsibilities in September 2002.

(i) Quality

All the interviewees agreed that councils could help to deliver a better quality education:

> "In so far as quality of education is more than academic results, it's a whole development of the person and in that regard shaping the person in all sorts of levels, in that respect it would" (School 6).

> "In name definitely and the idealism behind a student council, sure of course it would help to contribute to the quality of life." (School 1).

The general view was that by taking on the responsibilities of a student council, students learned about responsibilities in life and how to handle them. This was considered an essential part of a good quality education.

> "I think it certainly can for the students directly involved in it. It is
> hands on experience. They learn how important it is to take on
> responsibility. It would improve the quality over years." (School 5)

The student council was considered, too, to improve the facilities for the students and so improve their everyday lives in school.

> "It's (student council) for getting things like the toilets, the facilities,
> concrete things, very achievable. There's no doubt that it, of course,
> can contribute to quality. "(School 1).

Some teachers expressed the opinion that the council should become more involved in curriculum development and subject choices, thus further improving, in their view, the students' quality of education.

> "They could make school authority aware of issues, concerns re.
> subjects, choices, codes of conduct, discipline ".(School 6)

Other teachers considered that the council should be more involved in support for sporting activities in the school. A student council, too, would encourage ownership, participation and pride in one's school.

> "A student council gives students a feeling of ownership and pride in
> their school and a sense of being listened to and respected." (School 4)

> "...would encourage pride in the school community which would have
> a knock on effect and encourage participation and counterbalance apathy,
> and have a knock on effect on quality." (School 3)

The opinion was also voiced that a student council might develop in a direction considered "not desirable" by the management of the school and could adversely effect the quality of education.

Overall, the teachers agreed that, if we took education as meaning more than a group of subjects, then a student council, with encouragement and guidance, would help to improve the quality of education on offer in Irish post primary schools.

(ii) Equality

The next question dealt with equality. Interestingly, the interviewees in the mixed schools were not concerned with *gender equality*. They felt that they dealt with equality issues all the time and they were "no big deal". The students in these schools accepted the principle of gender equality and acted it out almost without consciously articulating it.

> "Actually the way they live out their daily life, it doesn't seem to have much of an effect on them. They have it, I think, at the back of their minds but they don't see.., the girls feel that they have as much right as the boys, the girls do more of the work. It is not really an issue." (School 5).

> "In a mixed school there is equality between the sexes anyway." (School 6)

In the single sex schools it was felt that gender equality was not relevant within their school context.

Equality of students and staff was seen as an issue in some schools, with the fact that the opinions of students were often not sought and not listened to when expressed. Yet teachers made such comments as:

> "A student council provides a forum for students to voice their opinions". (School 4)

> "The student council certainly contributes to equality, if the notion of partnership in education really means what it's going to be, pupils, parents, teachers and the business community, if there is, if it is not just a pretend word, then the student council, in this regard, the student council will have a major role in contributing to equality in education." (School 6)

The inequality of teachers and students was regarded as an issue that was destined to continue and considered by some of the interviewees as necessary and desirable. Teachers spoke about students as "junior" partners in education, where they would have a voice but management could and would overrule them often .

Ability equality (equality of representation of pupils of high and low academic ability) was voiced by some of the interviewees. Yet they said that, from experience, it was not the weaker students who participated most in student council activities.

> "Are you drawing in the intellectually challenged students? In

> my own school, the reaching out to these students(LCA) was done
> but it didn't get the response." (School 6)

Interestingly, nor did the top ability students get involved in the student council.

> "There isn't really a preponderance of high, say, achievers or the
> opposite. It is fairly mixed. There is a mixture." (School 2)

> "It wouldn't always necessarily be the best academic student that
> we would have as Head Girl, even running the committee generally,
> you know.....They are big into points, achievement, those less
> focussed on points, work very, very well." (School 7)

The issue of equal representation for all classes on the council was much discussed.

Some schools have greater representation from the higher classes and the "working

committee" of the council is often taken from the senior classes.

> "Our committee is run mainly by seniors. .... I think maybe,
> certainly, some of the juniors feel that maybe they don't have as much
> of a voice and maybe that needs to be addressed.......Some students
> feel more equal than others and sometimes there is inequality there
> between juniors and seniors." (School 7).

> ...inverted pyramid with a heavy weighing at the top in terms of 5th
> and 6th years". (School 6).

Also the issue of how democratic the elections to the council should be engendered

lively discussion.

Overall, the issue of equality was felt to be multifaceted and in constant need of review.

> "You have to be constantly rethinking. There has to be an openness
> if there's going to be equality". (School 6)

These findings on the concept of equality confirm the concerns expressed in part 3 of

the questionnaire.

(iii) Partnership

Partnership was tied up in many minds with the compilation of the School Plan. In all

schools the students had been involved to some degree, especially in updating codes of

conduct.

> "We certainly have used the student council when we were
> doing things like...em... the school plan. It was through the
> student council that the students were consulted on that,
> and when we were making out the mission statement. Whether
> the students see that as partnership or not, I don't know." (School 7)

Some felt that there was a long way to go to include students as equal partners in education while others felt that students would and should never be equal partners in education. In School 2 the students did have an equal role in compiling the policy on drugs;

> "....couple of parents, couple of students, couple of teachers involved. It was a very specific and deliberate role to play in that area. They had an equal role in the sense that there were two parents, two students, two teachers." (School 2)

All agreed that students should play a greater role in decision making but the final decisions lay with those who held the responsibility i.e. management.

> "I suppose a student council should give students a greater say, make sure their voice is heard. It is easier for a principal to deal with a group of students who have a role." (School 3)

> "It gives students a say in decision making. They would be partners with management and parents. They could negotiate with management. It develops an atmosphere of co-operation between various groups of students and between students and staff." (School 4)

One teacher asked

> "How genuine was this (partnership)? Does every school want students as partners? They can't be full partners because they are still learning. It is the whole notion that we are preparing them for tomorrow. It is a preparation for the democratic process." (School 6)

The responses by both teachers and students to the open questions on their questionnaires confirm partnership to be an area of disagreement. Teachers/management want students to be "junior" partners while students view such an inferior role as so diminishing of their part in partnership as to make it a sham. No interviewee mentioned a place at staff or Board of Management meetings for students, thus, again, confirming the results of the questionnaire (teachers do not see a role for students at staff or Board meetings).

(iv) Pluralism

Pluralism was a puzzle to many of the interviewees. They all asked for an explanation of the word and examples of it in education.

> I'm not sure of my understanding of that and I went to my dictionary

and to be honest, I'm not 100% sure, I mean, I understand it as did all
the students have a voice." (School 7)

With regard to inclusivity in school life of all the students, it was agreed that students of

different racial or religious background to the majority in the school, just wanted to

"blend in" and did not want their "diversity" highlighted or celebrated.

"I don't think they want to be picked out." (School 2)

"I wouldn't be aware of religious differences. Minorities would
be so small, by being pluralist I'm not sure it would be the best way
to make them blend in." (School 3)

"I do think that the student council could contribute (to Pluralism) but
if it's not broken don't fix it and that's something that should be looked
at on a school to school basis, you know what I mean." (School 6)

It was concluded that, while pluralism in education was desirable it was not an "in

school" issue.

"We don't have different religions, we don't have different races. We
actually, I mean, I was trying to think there, we have one first year who
is Indian. It never came up as an issue." (School 7)

It was also agreed that, should race, religion etc become an issue for one or more

students within a school, then the student council would have a role to play to see that

all students were treated equally and fairly.

"A student council could draw attention to and make authorities aware
of, feelings of discrimination on grounds of gender, class, religion for
example, Church of Ireland students and teachers may feel excluded
when only a Catholic ceremony is celebrated on school occasions." (School 4)

"I think a student council would have a role to play in Pluralism alright." (School 5)

They (student council) might be able in some way look at various
minority students in the school, like physical handicapped or foreign
students in the school, if they had problems. It's possible that a student
council would help them." (School 2)

No interviewee saw inter-school activities with schools of other denominations as part

of this issue. This confirms the findings of the questionnaire.

(v) Accountability

Accountability for their own activities was seen as the priority when discussing this

issue.

> "I certainly think the student council should be accountable to the students." (School 7)

Teachers felt that students must learn to be accountable for their own actions and their

own progress in school.

> "They have to be accountable for their own activities, in charge
> of funding and things like that and if the organising turns out to
> be a disaster, then they must learn to take the flack." (School 6)

> "A council also makes students answerable for their own decisions
> and actions. They would be involved in decisions re codes of conduct
> and so would feel a sense of ownership and would feel answerable to
> each other and to school staff." (School 4)

It was felt that students would learn to negotiate, to prioritise and to compromise by

running their own council.

> "I would consider that it would be very poor management if
> there was a delegation of reasonable people, making reasonable
> suggestions and prepared to compromise and management would
> not reach some sort of agreement with them." (School 6)

The idea that teachers might be accountable for their actions to students was not

received well by all but one of the interviewees. He stated:

> "A student council provides students with an avenue to speak to the
> school authority re. teacher or school problems and thus makes the
> authorities answerable to them." (School 4)

Others were quite fearful of the idea and were reluctant to even discuss it.

> "But I suppose the student council would have a kind of a role to
> play there...em...whether or not there is, I don't know ...if the
> student council can make the teachers accountable to them." (School 7)

> "A lot of people would feel uncomfortable with that." (School 5)

This confirms the views expressed regarding teacher apprehension in the open questions

in part 3 of the questionnaire.

(vi) Overview of opinions

Overall, the interviewees agreed that a student council would, should and could help to

deliver a greater degree of quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability in

Irish Post Primary schools.

The key personnel in delivering these concepts in the schools were identified by all the

interviewees as,

1. Principal,

2. Staff

3. Teacher co-ordinator of the student council.

Only one teacher mentioned the students themselves.

When asked about the future of student councils in Irish schools, all the teachers were

positive, even hopeful but agreed that pupil apathy was a major concern. This must be

overcome if the councils are to be anything more than a "front" for management and a

"talking shop". Teachers felt that both the government and school management must

take the role of the student council more seriously and be seen to listen.

> "Management of the school can be the greatest obstacle to a
> student council. They may be paying lip service to the notion
> of partnership, they may not be aware that they are only paying
> lip service. They might really believe that they are being progressive."
> (School 6)

Teachers perceived that the issue of not taking the student council seriously is central to

how students feel about their councils. The students, in their responses, expressed this

very forcefully.

All the teachers suggested that the Department of Education should provide guidelines

to schools. (This has been done since the interviews.) They also believed that the post

of teacher co-ordinator should be made a post of responsibility on its own and not as

part of a "basket" of responsibilities. This, it was felt, would demonstrate how seriously

management was taking their role in student councils. Some even suggested that the

government should provide financial backing for the councils in the schools. Training for teachers and students should be a priority. These same points were expressed in part 3 of the questionnaire.

c) **Conclusions**

- Overall, the interviewees were very positive regarding the possible role of a student council in post primary schools.

- There appeared to be greater "on hands" involvement by the female co-ordinators. The male teachers expressed the opinion that it "was up to the students" whether the council was a success or not.

- They were all convinced of the support of their Principals for the student council and stated that, without it, the council would not succeed.

- However, they were quite negative regarding the support of other staff members and the students themselves.

- They all agreed that greater involvement and commitment by the Department for Education and Science was necessary if the councils were to be successful. The Education Act of 1998 was a beginning but it "lacked teeth".

4.3 Student Questionnaire

a) **Introduction**

Thirty copies of the student questionnaire were given to the teacher co-ordinator or deputy principal of the seven schools that took part in interviews and 171 were completed. One school did not have its own student council so they completed the first five sections of the questionnaire only.

b) Findings of student questionnaire

(i) Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha test was used to check the reliability of the sections in the questionnaire. The results were as follows;

Table 17; Reliability test results-student questionnaire.

Subject	Respondents	Items	Alpha
Equality	171	5	.2982
Quality	171	5	.7716
Partnership	171	5	.6451
Pluralism	171	5	.4393
Accountability	171	5	.7034
Own Student Council	145	5	.8395

The reliability level of four of the sections, Quality, Partnership, Accountability, and Own Student Council is good. That for Equality is very low, while the level for Pluralism is marginal.

(ii) Mean scores

Mean scores were recorded for the first five sections of the questionnaire that asked the students their opinions of the possibility of the five Key Considerations being delivered by a student council.

Table 18 shows the mean scores of the combined descriptives for each of the five Key Considerations.

Table 18; Mean scores for combined descriptives.

Key Considerations	Equality	Quality	Partnership	Pluralism	Accountability
Mean scores	23.1170	15.0409	16.9235	20.0760	20.6667
Result	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive

The mid-point was 15. Therefore students believe that a student council can help to deliver all five of the Key Considerations. The highest score was awarded to Equality and the lowest to Quality.

The mean scores for the descriptives individually under each of the Key Considerations were as follows;

Table 19; Mean scores for individual descriptives

Key Considerations	Equality	Quality	Partnership	Pluralism	Accountability
Mean score	4.6234	3.0082	3.3847	4.0152	4.1333
Result	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive

The mid-point was 3. Therefore all five Key Considerations scored positively. This closer look at the beliefs of the students confirmed their view that a student council can help to deliver all five of the Key Considerations.

Section 6 of the questionnaire asked the students about their opinions of their own student council. The results of the reliability tests were Alpha=.8386, a high level of reliability. The mean score for the combined descriptives was 12.7103 (mid point=15), while that of the individual items was 2.542 (mid point=3). This gives this section of the questionnaire a negative result.

These results were further analysed, firstly, by the gender of the students who completed the questionnaire. There were 104 girls and 67 boys. The boys were negative on all five descriptives. The girls were positive on three of the descriptives as follows; "The student council in this school is very successful," "Our student council represents the students well" and "The students in this school support their council". They were negative on two; "Management listens to our student council" and "Being a member of the student council gives a person status among his/her peers".

These results were then analysed according to the gender of the school population, all girls, all boys or mixed. This was done to see if the gender of the general school population might have an effect on the way the students answered. Again the result for the All boys schools was negative on all five descriptives. The All girls schools scored positively on two of the descriptives; "The student council in this school is very successful" and "Our student council represents the students well". The students in the mixed schools were positive on only one descriptive; "The students in this school

support their council". It is worth pointing out that all students awarded a negative score to "Management listens to our student council" and "Being a member of the student council gives a person status among his/her peers". It indicates quite clearly that students do not feel listened to by management. This was emphatically confirmed by the responses to the open questions.

(iii) Student Open Questions.

There were two open questions at the end of the pupil questionnaire. Firstly the students were asked to name three key words or phrases that they would associate with a successful student council. In answering these questions the students, generally, failed to be objective. They answered from a personal perspective, using such phrases as "our council...", "we found..." or " they...". The responses are as follows.

Firstly, the students want to be heard. They want, not only management, but their own council to listen to them. They perceive their present role in council activities to be passive and non-contributory.

Secondly, the students are very aware of the inequality of a) class representation on the council and b) inequality of "power" between their own and staff control of the council. Thirdly, the students say that they can see no tangible "results" from the activities of the council.

The second open question on the student questionnaire asked the students to list three key words/phrases that they would associate with an unsuccessful student council. The student responses proved to have direct reference to their own councils. They fit into three categories. Firstly, the students tell of the apathy of the general student body toward their council. They blame this on the low profile of the council and its failure to deliver results. Secondly, they identify the lack of communication between students and council. Lastly, they point to the inequality of representation on the council.

While answering the second question on the characteristics of an unsuccessful council the students often referred to their own council with remarks like;

> "Honestly I think the student council did nothing for the school. I never
> hear any of my class group talking about them."

and

> "The student council's hands are tied. They have little leeway."

And

> "The council meeting with the management and nothing being done
> for the school body. Just using the student council to make the school
> look good."

The students appear to have no confidence in the councils. They perceive them to be ineffective. Consequently, at best they feel apathetic, at worst, angry.

These responses correspond with the results of the previous questions on the student questionnaire. They reinforce the overwhelming negative impression that the students have of the working of their own student councils. It is worth noting here that, although few words were used, an impression of disillusionment and even anger came across.

c) Conclusions to student questionnaire

- The students are of the opinion that a student council could help to deliver the five Key Considerations of Equality, Quality, Partnership, Pluralism and Accountability in the schools.

- The overall opinion of the working of their own student council is negative.

- Analysing by gender of the respondent, the boys are negative on all five descriptives while the girls are positive on three ("The student council in this school is very successful", "Our student council represents the students well" and "The students in this school support their council") and negative on two ("Management listens to our student council" and "Being a member of the student council gives a person status among his/her peers").

- Analysing by gender of the school, again, the boys' schools are negative on all five descriptives, the girls' schools are negative on three ("Management listens to our student council", "The students in this school support their council" and "Being a member of the student council gives a person status among his/her peers") and positive on two ("The student council in this school is very successful" and " Our student council represents the students well") and the mixed schools are negative on four and positive on one ("The students in this school support their council").

- All students scored negatively on "Management listens to the student council."

- Students are unhappy with the performance of their student councils.

- Students are concerned about the system of representation used on their councils.

- Students are dissatisfied with the way their councils communicate with them.

Chapter 5

<u>Discussion & Recommendations</u>

<u>5.1 Schools and Student Councils</u>

a) Number of Student Councils

The Education Act of 1998 required all Boards of Management of second level schools in Ireland to facilitate their students in the setting up of student councils. This research was carried out three years later in 2001-2002. Of the second level schools in Cork (91) that responded to the survey (65), two thirds (43) had set up a student council. Since that date six additional Cork schools have been in touch with this researcher for guidance in setting up a council. That brings the total number of Cork second level schools with a student council to 49.

What of the schools that did not answer the survey (26 schools)? It is probable that there was a certain amount of self-selection in the numbers that responded to the survey, in that those schools without their own student council might be reluctant to answer a survey about student councils. If this were so, then one could assume that, of the 26 schools that did not reply, a higher than expected number did not have a student council. Taking the worst scenario, we might suppose that of the 91 second level schools in County Cork, 49 have a student council and 42 do not (54% - yes: 46% - no). The goal of the Department for Education and Science, as set out in the Education Act, 1998, is that every second level school would have a student council. This research has found that the second level schools in Cork are increasing their implementation of the Education Act but are a long way from achieving its goal.

b) Training

In the execution of this research and in pursuit of her particular interest in student councils and the running of training days for students and co-ordinators of councils, this researcher has come in contact with a large number of second level schools in Munster. A high level of apprehension among staff with regard to the presence of student councils in schools was reflected in personal meetings, the responses to the open questions in the survey and during the interviews with staff members. The same feeling of trepidation is recorded in the research completed by the National Youth Council of Ireland (2001), Luke Monahan (1999), O'Gorman (1998) and Gold (1994), MASC (1999) and Trafford (1993). A number of teachers fear that a student council will set up unrealistic expectations among students. They have expressed opinions that a council might become "militant" and "run out of control", that they might make demands of management that cannot be acceded (NYCI. 2001.p.75). A major feature of the training days has been dealing with these fears and assuring staff that, with training and understanding of the role of student councils, the councils could be a valuable part of the education partnership.

A second feature in the survey was the desire expressed by staff for inservice training for themselves and students on how to set up a council, how to run it, what role it should fulfil and how to engender enthusiasm for it among the student body. This echoes the necessity for training contained in almost every piece written on student councils reported in the literature review. The Department of Education has provided one such course in Cork. This research has found that the desire for training concerning student councils is high on the agenda of teachers and is not being met. If the DES plans to achieve its target of 100% of second level schools with student councils, then they must address this issue.

c) School Characteristics

This research found that 65% (28) of the schools that responded has a student council that is less than four years old. 39% (11) of these councils are only one year old. This would, again, suggest that the implementation of the Education Act of 1998 is gathering momentum. The NYCI (2001) research supports this when they stated that the majority of Student Councils are less than four years old.

As regards the issue of gender, this research found that the all-girls' schools (59%) were less likely to have a Student Council, falling behind both the all-boys' schools (67%) and the mixed schools (69%). These findings do not correspond to those of the NYCI (2001, p.18) research which found that an all-girls' school is more likely to have a Student Council than an all-boys' school.

The findings of this research based these percentages on the total number of that type of school in the county. If, however, one based the percentage on the number of the schools that responded to the survey, then the figures are as follows;

All-girls' schools with a Student Council	23%
All-boys' schools with a Student Council	19%
Mixed schools with a Student Council	58%

There can be no doubt, based on both these sets of figures, that the school most likely to have a Student Council is a mixed gender school. Taking into account that the mixed schools are the most modern type of school in Irish society and that their system of management tends to be more participatory and less pyramidal, then this finding is not surprising.

This research also took into account the size of the school while looking at those with/without Student Councils. The figures for the small schools were statistically significant. Such schools are least likely to have a Student Council. Perhaps such a school, where a community atmosphere is most likely to prevail, feels that everyone

knows everyone else and that word spreads more quickly, thus doing away with the need for a formal system for the dissemination of information i.e. a student council. During the survey many schools stated that their council consisted of senior students only. This is clearly not acceptable as stated in the DES guidelines (2002) and The NYCI publication (2001). The survey of teachers confirmed this imbalance of representation. The survey of students stated it as a cause of a lack of student support for their councils. Staff, when interviewed, stated that the staff in their school felt that with senior students only on the council, then the council was more likely to operate in compliance with the school ethos. Confining the council thus could be an expression of the apprehension of staff regarding the operation of the student councils.

The Department states that "a Student Council will thrive only if the students themselves are committed to the concept and to making it work"(2002, p8). This commitment by students was one of the problems shown up in the student survey. There was strong evidence in the research of student distrust of both management and the student council itself and a general apathy towards the council by the general student body. The teachers during the interviews referred to this apathy also. A number of teachers stated that they felt that they were working alone without the support of the students.

From these findings with regard to school characteristics this research concludes that second level schools in Cork are moving forward towards compliance with the articles of the Education Act. There is an increase in the number of schools with a student council. However, these councils do not fairly represent the students and so lose credibility in their eyes. This issue is of paramount importance and must be addressed.

d) Principals.

The research found that the attitudes of the principals of the responding schools are positive. It is the job of the principal to implement the policy decisions of the Board of

Management. The Education Act (1998) places the onus to facilitate or/and to encourage the students to set up councils on the Boards. Without the support of the principals the councils would never have come into existence in the first place. Their support needs to be active, ongoing and open, even aggressive, if the councils are to succeed. Teachers interviewed stated that they needed this support in order to overcome opposition to the councils among some sections of the staff.

5.2 Key Considerations and Teachers' Perceptions

a) Quality

Teachers believe that student councils can help to deliver the five Key Considerations (Quality, Equality, Partnership, Pluralism and Accountability), as laid out in the government White Paper on Education (1995, p.3) as the basis of its philosophical rationale for educational policy and practice.

This research confirms earlier work (Browne, 1996, Trafford, 1997, NYCI, 2001 & Ireland, 2002) that a Student Council improves the Quality of education in a school. This was found to be so both with the ideal and the actual Student Council. The Department of Education states that participation in a Student Council "is itself a valuable part of the educational process" (Ireland, 2002. p.8) and confirms that it improves academic standards. When interviewed, teachers were in no doubt that the existence of a Student Council in a school is the perfect way to demonstrate the concepts contained in the Civic, Social and Political Education programme for Junior Certificate students. The experience of their own student council brings the abstract concepts of democracy and participation to life for the students. They can "see" it work or, conversely, "see" it not working. Hereby lies the rub! If the council is seen to work for the students then the quality of their education in that school is enhanced. Teachers believe that they leave school, not only with an understanding of how democracy works but with a belief that it is a system worth using. This, in turn, encourages the young

voter to fulfil his/her role in that democracy throughout his/her adult life (HMSO 1990. Trafford, 1997). But if the council is seen not to work, teachers stated, then untold damage can be done to the students' belief in democracy as a credible system of government. Students may leave school with a belief that democracy does not deliver and that it is those in power who make the decisions, regardless of the views at the grass roots.

Teachers participating in this research stated also, that involvement in a student council can reduce incidents of indiscipline within the school and ultimately may lower the dropout numbers, thus confirming previous research by Davies, (1995) and Ainsworth (1997).

This research also confirms that a council within a school can deliver to the students an improvement in their every day conditions (Duffy & Flynn, 1992, Monahan, 1996 & O'Gorman, 1998). Management does not always know what is a priority for students. An active student council will allow the students to express their opinions regarding their priorities. It will improve the quality of their education for the students to have to acquire the skills to express their needs in acceptable terms, to negotiate with management, to see both sides of a situation, to accept compromise when necessary, to lose gracefully or to rejoice without gloating. Teachers in this research confirmed that a student council provides the opportunity for students to acquire these life skills.

The perceptions of teachers, as expressed in both the survey and the interviews as part of this research, confirm previous research that a student council can enhance the overall quality of education and is doing so in their schools.

b) Equality

The research found that teachers perceived both the ideal and the actual student councils to deliver on equality. However, one particular area of difficulty, exposed by the interviews in this research, was the method of student representation employed in some

schools. Each class is not represented. In some schools even each year group may not be represented. The balance of representation is in favour of the more senior classes. The NYCI (2001) remarked on this imbalance and asked schools to look again at how council members were elected. They advocate that every class has a representative on the council, that a secret ballot be held, gender balance be catered for and that all members have equal status on the council. The Department of Education's publication (2002) reiterates these same points and this researcher supports these recommendations. If we want to give the students a true experience of democracy then we must adhere to the principles inherent in such institutions. If we interfere with those principles students will lose faith in the system and the consequences could be the opposite to that which we wish i.e. apathy, even distrust in the Student Council and in the democratic system (HMSO 1990 & Trafford, 1997). Many teachers during this research remarked on lack of credibility of the student council in the eyes of the students. In the minds of the teachers interviewed this may be caused by the system of student representation in the school. Staff, teachers stated, were more "comfortable" with a representation of students in favour of the senior classes, sometimes to the complete exclusion of junior students.

Ireland is experiencing apathy and distrust in its institutions as we move into the twenty first century. Student Councils could be one long-term method of helping to restore confidence and participation in our democratic society. To achieve that, the representation on the councils must be both democratic and transparent. This issue of student representation needs to be addressed.

Gender inequality was not an issue during this research. The single sex schools could see no place for it in their daily school lives and in the mixed schools, this researcher was assured by more than one teacher during interviews, that it was never an issue for

the students. The girls took it for granted that they were equal to the boys in every respect and the boys did not dispute this.

However, gender balance was considered important enough for the Department of Education to make reference to it in its guidelines (2002). It is also mentioned in the NYCI publication. A system for gender balance on the student council could be part of the council's constitution. If this acceptance of gender balance were part of school life, it could be one method of combating the gender inequality in management as highlighted by the Education Convention (1993) and the ESRI (1996).

An emphasis on gender equality on the student council could also be used as an example in our efforts to deal with the gender imbalance in subject choices, academic performance and stereo typing in second level schools generally (ESRI, 1983 & 1996).

c) Partnership

Partnership was one issue on which the teachers surveyed expressed doubts, although their overall response with the ideal Student Council was positive. Teachers would have preferred the term partnership to be qualified. "What degree of partnership did the research refer to?" was a question often asked during the interview sessions. They agreed that they wanted to bring the students on board, to consult with them regarding new school policies and that to have their backing on school issues would be helpful. But they also wanted the students to realise that they were very much the junior partners.

Teachers often, at this point during interview, started to discuss the type of partnership that they perceived to be operating in their own school regarding themselves. Their views on Partnership seemed, in discussions with this researcher, to be tied to the notion of students having an equal partnership with management, while they, as teachers, are still struggling with a pyramid style of management, both within the school and in the Department of Education. They expressed the view that students could not expect to

have a greater influence on matters in the school than the teachers did. Overall, while teachers agreed that student participation in educational partnership would be a positive thing in Irish education, they wanted that partnership limited.

Discussing partnership with teachers both during this research and during training days with co-ordinators, brought out all the apprehension that teachers deal with in the staff room regarding militancy and a student council (Monahan, 1999). This apprehension is most apparent in the school without a student council. Here the fear of the unknown is at work. Teachers, by nature and practice, are conservative and slow to accept new work systems. In these days of constant change in the Irish education system, this seems like a contradiction. Perhaps Irish teachers feel that changes in syllabi, methodology and assessment are necessary, exciting and energising while changing their relationship with students to that of partners, is just going that one step too far. They may feel that they have done enough for the present.

In the schools with a student council, especially if that council has been operating for several years, the staff and students have established a working relationship, even though teachers' perceptions of Partnership and the actual students' councils were negative. One might make the observation that if a workable relationship is not in operation, then, because of the power imbalance between teachers and students, the student council will not survive. The skills necessary for the continuance of a student council must be taught (by teachers?) and learned (by students?).

A student council representative on the Board of Management or attending a staff meeting are possible ways to enhance the partnership role of the council, yet this research found that with both the ideal and the actual councils, the teachers did not perceive this as a way forward.

d) Pluralism

One of the restrictions of a survey is that it does not allow for any clarification of the terms employed. During the interviews, teachers expressed confusion regarding the term Pluralism. The confusion over the term is itself, an important finding and teachers were convinced that students also did not understand it. The interpretation of the term, as used in the survey, cannot be confirmed. Acknowledging this situation, this research found that teachers had positive perceptions regarding pluralism and the ideal student council but did not perceive the actual student councils in their schools to be delivering on this concept.

The interviewer tried not to superimpose her own understanding of the term but rather to seek to understand how the teachers interpreted it. Teachers, in interview, understood the term to mean the acceptance of students, by other students and the school system, who were "different". This difference might be ethnic, religious, status in society, academic or physical ability. Overall, the teachers felt acceptance of such students was already a part of school life and that students who were "different" did not want that difference highlighted but rather they wanted to blend in and be the same as all the other students. However, the number of students who are perceived to be "different" is small. This, teachers stated, may explain why they are so easily accepted by the general student body and why the "different" student just wants to blend in. Teachers felt that there was little opportunity within the school for the practice of pluralism as they understood it, rather as an abstract issue to be discussed i.e. racism. It was perceived to be an issue for the wider picture in education i.e. the DES and the Boards of Management.

Teachers commented that the students were not involved in the interchange of ideas with students of other denominations and that they did not see this as an area to be

developed by the student council. Some stated that they were not aware of the religion of each student and did not feel that it was relevant.

e) Accountability

Accountability and the Student Council scored positively on the survey for both the ideal and the actual student council. Teachers were very clear that student councils themselves must be accountable and transparent in all their activities. They must learn to see projects to a conclusion and not give up on the way. They felt that this need to complete was one of the important learning experiences for the students. The members would learn to be selective regarding the tasks they undertook if they accepted the necessity to see it through to a conclusion. They would learn to examine each possible task from every angle, thus developing an understanding of other points of view e.g. that of parents and/or management. They would also learn that if they did not complete or succeed in their task then they would have to explain to their peers what went wrong and why. This could be a valuable lesson, teachers felt, not just for council members, but for the whole student body.

The council's own accountability for its funds was seen by teachers as an important learning experience for the students. They must account for every penny they raise and spend and should be able to justify each expenditure both to students and management. They also need to keep accurate minutes of decisions taken at meetings and fulfil the task of class representative to the best of their ability. These findings support views expressed by the NYCI (2001) and the DES guidelines (2002).

Teachers, in interview, were very wary of the notion that they might be accountable to the students directly or discussed in council meetings. Evaluation of teachers by students is practised in Norway and the student councils there are assigned an active role in such procedures. If the role of the student council in Irish schools is clearly stated and understood by both staff and students, then evaluation of staff by students

could be clearly ruled out. To facilitate such clarity, the parameters of the council and its mandate could be arrived at through consultation between Boards of Management, staff, parents and students, thus also enhancing educational partnership. One must ask why assessment by students is so unacceptable to teachers? It would seem ironic that the opinions of the clients of the schools are not solicited in a school's efforts to improve its service.

The task of a student council co-ordinator was discussed during interviews. It was not part of the original research but teachers wanted to express their views. They stated that they had found that the task of a student council co-ordinator is vast and never ending. They felt that for a student council to be successful and for the school community to benefit to the maximum, the task of informing and explaining the role of the council to the students needs to be undertaken by the whole staff, on an ongoing basis because of the transient nature of the school population. They felt that a student council is a whole school undertaking and cannot be assigned to one teacher alone. They stated that they experienced feelings of isolation in their task.

In interview, acknowledging that the numbers were small, this research found that there was a clear division in attitude between the male and female co-ordinators. The male co-ordinators were of the opinion, which was reflected in their level of activity with the student council, that the council should sink or swim on its own. If the student body did not support the council and if the council itself was not over active, then it was a problem for the students to address. They did not see, given their other responsibilities in the school and the limited time available to them, that it was their responsibility to do anything about a failing council. The female co-ordinators, on the other hand, were most concerned if they perceived "their" council to be failing. They were constantly seeking ways to identify the problems and ways to rectify them. They were much more involved with the councils, suggesting, supporting and encouraging.

This gender difference in support for the council and the teachers' feeling of isolation as council co-ordinators points, again, to the need for training for the role, not only for the co-ordinator but also for general staff and students. We cannot expect, teachers stated, students to be able to run a student council without a clear understanding of the role and the work involved. The skills required are multifaceted. They need the ongoing guidance of supportive and trained staff. Staff, in turn, needs the support, time and resources that the DES should provide if they are serious about developing the full potential of student councils.

5.3 Students and Student Councils

Students, in their responses to the survey, were positive regarding student councils helping to deliver the five key considerations in second level schools. However, they were negative regarding the activities of their own student councils, the boys more so than the girls. This research found that the level of dissatisfaction was very high and the feeling of anger towards their council and school management was almost palpable. Students stated that they do not feel part of school partnership, not even as junior partners. They do not feel that they are consulted or that management listens to them. They feel excluded within their own schools. They stated that the council was only allowed to operate within strictly controlled areas and that even this can change depending on circumstances at any particular time.

Many responses referred to favouritism by members of the councils and by teachers in the choice of members of the councils. The students expressed their lack of faith in council members to be accountable to the students and to be transparent in their dealings.

Students, in the survey, stated that they were not informed of the activities of their council. Even where there was an established system of disseminating information outwards to students, staff and management, students stated that their representatives

were not keeping them informed. They wanted every student to be able to access members of the council, not just close friends of the representatives. The council itself must have an established system of communication with staff and management so that both sides are free to express their opinions in a secure atmosphere and feel that their point of view is given due consideration.

The response of the students begs the question, are the students expecting too much of their councils? Students are seeking fair representation, access to their representatives and so to the council, to be kept informed regarding areas under discussion, to be consulted and listened to.

DES (2002) and NYCI (2001) guidelines recommend secret elections of representatives from each class or year group to the council and this is what the students were demanding in their responses to the survey. In practice, many school managements appoint the members to the council and confine that choice to senior or 6th year representatives. These representatives are encouraged to liaise with each of the junior classes and so, management feels, that the junior classes are represented. The students want to choose their own council members. Teachers, when defending the method of election to the council in their school, stated that they and the principal were afraid that the "wrong" students might be chosen. They feared that militant students might take over the council. They also maintained that council members chosen by the students may not project a "good" image of the school. There will be many occasions on which the student council will represent the school and teachers, as expressed in interview, wanted the students who, in their opinion, would project the "right" image of the school. Students stated that teachers wanted students on the council who, they (teachers) feel, would be open to reason on issues raised at meetings and "tow the management line". There are basic conflicts here regarding the role of council members as seen by management and staff, and the students. Staff see the role of the council to help them in

their jobs of education within the stated philosophy of the school. The students see it as giving them some control of their working conditions and environment. Each is correct in its own way. The issue needs open discussion, clarification and accommodation of views. This should be undertaken at school level while the idea of a council is in its embryonic state. Without this exchange of views, a student council will not meet the needs of any group and by its failure, it will discredit the whole idea of students as partners in education. This would be an important area for future reseach.

If both staff and students clarify the role of the council, access and fruitful interaction will follow and so will fulfil the other demands of the students. Council activities will be seen as everyone's responsibility; the council will consult and inform the students, the students will feed ideas to the council and seek accountability, and the staff will consult and listen to the council. This presents yet another argument for a whole school approach to a student council and the provision of training.

5.4 Who wants what?

a) Teachers.

Teachers interviewed stated that the general staffs in their schools are very apprehensive of student councils. There is a scarcity of literature on the subject that could alleviate the situation.

Teachers want a clear definition of the role of a student council and that of the council co-ordinator. They want a whole school approach to the setting up of a council and its ongoing functioning in the school. They want training for all those involved and they want the task of the teacher co-ordinator of the council to be recognised as a Post of Responsibility. During interview one teacher also suggested an association of co-ordinators that could eliminate the feeling of isolation experienced by such teachers.

At present, in the Irish post primary system, teachers are feeling under increasing pressure from all sides. They see a student council as adding to, not relieving, that

pressure. They are reluctant to commit themselves to something else new, time consuming and untried.

b) Students

Students are not as clear as teachers as to what they want from their councils. They are clear that they do not want what is on offer at the moment but want a system that is democratic and transparent.

Students also want to have free access to the council. At present, they claim that council members favour their own group of friends, who only deal with issues brought to them by these students. Students want to be kept informed as to the activities of the council. They want to have their issues heard by management, more as a right than as a favour, or "condescension", as some students phrased it.

Students have a notion that a student council, once put in place, will automatically function perfectly and deliver on their demands. Although not articulated by the students, they are seeking a clearer definition of the role of the council and training for its implementation. Being young, they are impatient with the process.

They do display a practical need for knowledge of how committees work, keep records and go about putting things in place and skills in negotiating and communicating. This research found that a properly functioning student council, the "ideal" student council, can deliver on all these things, and students believe this to be so, but it takes time, commitment and training.

Ultimately, Students want a council that they feel is "on their side" and in which they can have confidence.

c) Department for Education and Science.

The DES wants to deliver on the Education Act and have a student council in every second level school in Ireland. They have provided guidelines that are comprehensive and available (but limited in numbers to each school). However, they want to achieve

their objectives without providing training for teachers and students. Perhaps they should study the example of Norway and set up a centralised system of student councils. From the findings of research student councils in that country appear to be a) successful in representing students, b) acceptable to staff and c) are guided and supported by their Department of Education. The DES could show their support for student councils and teacher co-ordinators in Irish schools at the present time by proposing that the task warrants a Post of Responsibility. A quality product will cost both time and investment.

5.5 Definition of a Student Council.

This research set as one of its objectives to assemble its own definition of a student council. Teachers were asked what, in their opinion, were the essential elements of a student council. Students were asked to list three characteristics of a successful student council. Drawing on these replies and the requirements expressed in literature regarding student councils, the following is this researcher's definition.

A student council is a group of democratically elected students who are equally representative of all classes. It meets regularly to give voice to student concerns and works co-operatively with school management. It is accountable and transparent in all its activities and works for the benefit of the whole school community. Its mandate and mode of operation, which are clearly understood and open to ongoing review by all concerned, have been drawn up in consultation with students.

This definition caters for all the essential elements of a student council as expressed by respondents in this research. Training, which was high on teacher co-ordinators' lists, is provided for in the words "in consultation" and "clearly understood".

5.6 Recommendations.

Department of Education and Science;

- Make their guidelines for student councils more easily available,

- Give those same guidelines a higher profile,

- Provide inservice for Principals, general staff, council co-ordinators and students or fund schools to organise this themselves,

- Recommend to school management that the position of council co-ordinator be a Post of Responsibility,

- Set up a national association for co-ordinators as there is for other subjects on the curriculum,

- Fund research into the expectations of teachers and students of their student councils, and subsequent publication of findings,

- Disseminate best practices,

- Insist that a student council be an integral part of the School Plan.

Schools;

- Organise inservice for both staff and students regarding student councils, their activities and their responsibilities, based on the department guidelines,

- Appoint a staff member as council co-ordinator,

- Make the position of council co-ordinator a Post of Responsibility,

- Follow the guidelines for student councils provided by the DES,

- Include the student council as part of the School Plan,

- Give the student council a high profile within the school,

- Consult the council on matters affecting students,

- Listen to the response of the council,

- Facilitate and encourage communications between students, staff and council.

<u>Students;</u>

- Ask for clarification regarding the role of a student council in the school,

- Ask for a democratic and transparent system of election to the council,

- Support those chosen as council representatives,

- Communicate with the council,

- Study the guidelines published by the DES and make copies available in the school library,

- Accept that responsibilities come with rights,

- Acquire the skills demanded by the task,

- Network with other schools and countries,

- Demand that your council be transparent and accountable to the students.

<u>Others</u>

- Develop a handbook for schools seeking to set up a student council.

Appendices

Appendix 1
The Education Act, 1998
(Page 26, Section 27)

27.—(1) A board shall establish and maintain procedures for the purposes of informing students in a school of the activities of the school.

(2) The procedures established and maintained under *subsection (1)* shall facilitate the involvement of the students in the operation of the school, having regard to the age and experience of the students, in association with their parents and teachers.

(3) Students of a post-primary school may establish a student council and, without prejudice to the generality of *subsection (1)*, a board of a post-primary school shall encourage the establishment by students of a student council and shall facilitate and give all reasonable assistance to—

(*a*) students who wish to establish a student council, and

(*b*) student councils when they have been established.

(4) A student council shall promote the interests of the school and the involvement of students in the affairs of the school, in co-operation with the board, parents and teachers.

(5) The rules for the establishment of a student council shall be drawn up by the board, in accordance with such guidelines as may be issued by the Minister from time to time, and such rules may provide for the election of members and the dissolution of a student council.

(6) A student council, following consultation with the board, may make rules governing its meetings and the business and conduct of its affairs.

Appendix 2

Student Council Questionnaire

Part 1

This part of the work is designed to find out how many schools in the Cork area have student councils and how they are organized. All information given will be confidential. Please answer <u>every</u> question. It will take approx. 15 mins. to complete the questionnaire.
Draw a circle around your answer.

1. To which category does your school belong?

                                    Voluntary Sec. – religious principal
                                    Voluntary Sec. – lay principal
                                    Comprehensive School
                                    Community School,
                                    Community College,
                                    Vocational School

2. Is your school?   **All girls**
                                      All boys
                                      Mixed

3. Does your school have a student council?   **Yes   No**
       (If your answer is "yes" then please continue with Part 1. If your answer
       is "no" then please proceed to Part 2 of the questionnaire.)

4. How long has your student council been in existence?   **1 Year**
                                                                 2 Years
                                                                  3 Years
                                                                  4 Years
                                                                  5 Years
                                                       5 to 9 Years
                                                  over 10 years

5. Are there members from all <u>year groups</u> on the student council?   **Yes**

     No

6. Are there members from all <u>classes</u> on the student council?   **Yes**

     No

7. Is the representation weighted in any way?
       (e.g. greater representation given to senior classes)   **Yes No**
       If "yes" please explain

8. Who selects the members of the student council?   **Teachers,**
                                                                 Students,

9. Do pupils vote for their representatives?

Teachers & Students.

Yes, No.

10. Can any teacher veto the pupils' choice?

Yes, No.

11. Do teachers use their veto?

Often
sometimes
seldom
never

12. Are there any safeguards regarding gender balance of final numbers?

Yes, No,
Not applicable.

13. Do members of the student council wear any badge of office?

Yes, No.

14. Has a teacher co-ordinator been appointed to the student council?

Yes, No.

15. Is it a Post of Responsibility?

Yes, No.

16. Do you have a Head Student?

Yes, No.

17. Are possible candidates for Head Student interviewed by staff members?

Yes, No.

18. Do the students vote for the Head Student?

Yes, No.

19. Do the teachers vote for the Head Student?

Yes, No.

20. Do the votes carry equal weight?
      If "no" to any of the last 3 questions please explain.

Yes, No.

_____

_____

_____

Meetings

21. How often does the full student council meet?

Every week,
every fortnight,
once a month,
once a term.

22. Is there a committee(small group) formed from the full student council?

Yes, No.

23. How often does this committee meet?

Every week,
every fortnight,
once a month,
once a term.

24. Have officers been appointed, e.g. secretary, treasurer etc.?

Yes, No.

25. How long are the meetings?

½ hour
¾ hour
1 hour
varies

26. When are meetings held?

During school hours,
Outside school hours.

27. Is the teacher co-ordinator present at meetings?

Always,
sometimes,
seldom,
never.

28. Are other teachers allowed to attend meetings uninvited? Yes, No.

29. Do the students record their meetings (e.g. take minutes)? Yes, No.

30. Is the agenda prepared before the meeting? Yes, No.

31. Who prepares the agenda?

Head Student,
teacher co-ordinator,
committee of the student council,
combination of above.

Disseminating information.

32. Does the student council have its own notice board? Yes , No.

33. Are the minutes of the meetings made freely available to the school community? Yes, No.

34. Does the Student Council report to the Principal?

Often,
sometimes,
seldom,
never.

35. Does the student council report to the Board of Management?

Often,
sometimes,
seldom,
never.

36. Does the student council report to the classes?

Often,
sometimes,
seldom,
never.

37. Does the student council report to the Parents' Council?

Often,
sometimes,
seldom,
never.

38 Are the students generally aware of the activities of the student council?   Yes,   No.

39. Is the staff generally aware of the activities of the student council?   Yes,   No.

Activities of the student council.
40. Does the student council highlight the problem of bullying?   Yes,   No.

41. Does the student council involve itself in charity work?   Yes,   No.

42. Does the student council help to improve study facilities for the students?   Yes,   No.

43. Does the student council help improve recreation facilities for the students?   Yes,   No.

44. Does the student council organise fun activities for the students?   Yes,   No.

45. Is the student council ever involved in policy making in the school?   Often,
sometimes,
seldom,
never.

Constitution
46. Does the student council have a written constitution?   Yes,   No.

47. Who wrote the constitution?   **Staff,
Students,
Staff & Students,
Teacher co-ordinator,
Teacher co-ordinator & students.**

48. Are there provisions for the student council alone to change the constitution? Yes,   No.

49. Can the principal on his/her own, change the constitution?   Yes,   No.

50. Are copies of the constitution freely available?   Yes,   No.

51. Has the constitution evolved with the experience of the student council?   Yes,   No.

Attitudes to the student council.
52.How would you describe general staff attitudes to the student council?   **Very supportive,
Supportive,
Not bothered either way,
Vaguely hostile,
Very hostile,
Depends on the current issue**

53. How would you describe the principal's attitude to the student council?   **Very supportive,
Supportive,
Not bothered either way
Vaguely hostile
Very hostile,
Depends on the current issue**

54. How would you describe the position of the student council in your school?　　Struggling,
Finding its feet
Well established

Part 2

In this part of the questionnaire I am seeking to find out if the five key considerations of equality, quality, partnership, pluralism and accountability identified in the White Paper on Education(1998 can and are being delivered by the student council in the school. Down the centre of each page are the statements. On the left of the page you will score each statement according as you believe it can be delivered by a student council in a school. On the right you will score each statement according as you believe it is being delivered in your school by the student council. It is importar that you score each statement. If there is no student council in your school then please score in th left column only. Thank you again for your help.

1. Equality in Education

Please award a score to each statement using the following as a guide.

Very Well	=	5		Very Well	= 5
Fairly well	=	4		Fairly Well	= 4
Uncertain	=	3		Uncertain	= 3
Not well	=	2		Not well	= 2
Not at all	=	1		Not at all	= 1

How far can this be delivered in a school by a student council?　　　　**Does your student council council deliver this goal?**

5	4	3	2	1		5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	A student council helps to integrate minorities.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	A student council resolves the problems of victimization.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	Disaffection is reduced by a student council.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	The principle of gender equality is affirmed by a student council.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	All pupils have equal representation on a student council.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	The student council shares in school policy making.	5	4	3	2	1

<u>**Please award a score to each statement using the following as a guide.**</u>

Very Well	=	5	Very Well	= 5
Fairly well	=	4	Fairly well	= 4
Uncertain	=	3	Uncertain	= 3
Not well	=	2	Not well	= 2
Not at all	=	1	Not at all	= 1

2. Quality in Education

How far can this be delivered in a school by a student council? — **Does your student council deliver this goal?**

5 4 3 2 1	Statement	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	A student council increases pupil commitment to education.	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	Pupil grievances are resolved through the student council.	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	Student councils develop skills of negotiation.	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	Mutual respect between pupils and staff is created through the student council.	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	The student council is an expression of managements' high expectations of pupils.	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	Self confidence is developed amongst all pupils by a student council.	5 4 3 2 1

3. Student Partnership in Education

How far can this be delivered in a school by a student council? — **Does your student council deliver this goal?**

5 4 3 2 1	Statement	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	Students are equal partners in education.	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	Consulting students confers ownership of decisions on them.	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	A student council gives pupils a voice in the school.	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	Student partnership in education increases pupils' individual responsibility.	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	The student council has a representative at staff meetings.	5 4 3 2 1
5 4 3 2 1	The student council has a representative at Board of Management meetings.	5 4 3 2 1

4. Pluralism in Education

Please award a score to each statement using the following as a guide.

Very Well = 5	Very Well = 5
Fairly well = 4	Fairly well = 4
Uncertain = 3	Uncertain = 3
Not well = 2	Not well = 2
Not at all = 1	Not at all = 1

How far can this be delivered in a school by a student council?

Does your student council deliver this goal?

How far					Statement	Does deliver				
5	4	3	2	1	Pupils understand "pluralism in education".	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	The student council celebrates diversity within the school.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	The student council engages in the exchange of ideas with schools of other denominations.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	The student council supports minorities within the school community.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	Fair treatment of all pupils is important to the student council.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	The student council has a role to play in introducing pluralism to Irish schools.	5	4	3	2	1

5. Accountability in Education

How far can this be delivered in a school by a student council?

Does your student council deliver this goal?

How far					Statement	Does deliver				
5	4	3	2	1	Teachers welcome the activities of the student council.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	Teachers negotiate with students on matters of mutual interest.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	Pupils learn how democracy works through the example of the student council.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	Management actively pursue a policy of accountability to the pupils.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	The student council is committed to the principle of accountability.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	The student council is involved in the compilation of the school plan.	5	4	3	2	1

Part 3 - Towards a definition of a student council.

Part 3 - Towards a definition of a student council.

This section contains open questions. This is your opportunity to express your views regarding student councils, their future role and your hopes/fears for them.

1) How would you define a student council?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2) List its essential elements.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3) What do you see as its future role <u>in your school</u>?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4) What do you think its role <u>should</u> be in the Irish post primary school?

_____

_____

5) If a student council is to be successful should it be constantly evolving? In what way?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

6) Please feel free to add any comments on student councils you believe are relevant.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for your help. It is much appreciated.

Please post the completed questionnaire back to me by Friday, 5th October 2001(SAE enclosed).

<u>Covering Letter</u>

3, Riverside,
Church Road,
Carrigaline,
Co. Cork.

Tel./Fax   021 4372831

Email   ogormana.ias@eircom.net

Dear Colleague,

I am studying for a Doctorate in Education with Hull University. My research subject is Student Councils in the Cork area. I am writing to you to request your help in completing my research.

I enclose a questionnaire and earnestly request that you complete and return it. I enclose a SAE. I realise that this is a busy time of year for you. I suggest that you complete the questionnaire in approx. 30 mins and post it off immediately. Part 1 is seeking straightforward information. Part 2 is seeking your evaluation as to whether a Student Council can help to deliver quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability within our schools and also to what extent you believe that your Student Council is delivering these concepts. Part 3 is your opportunity to express your own thoughts on the future of student councils in Irish schools. All information will be treated in the strictest confidence.

I really value your opinions, without which my research will be incomplete.

It will be some time yet before I submit my thesis as I am studying part-time, but if you wish to receive a copy of my findings please let me know.

Many thanks again in anticipation of your co-operation.

Yours sincerely,

Aileen O'Gorman

Appendix 3
Student Questionnaire

This questionnaire is completely anonymous. Your answers will help my research into student councils in Irish Post Primary Schools. Thank you.

Are you?   male _____   female _____

This research is seeking to find out if student councils can help to deliver quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability within the school community. The first 25 questions are asking you what you think about student councils in general. Questions 26-30 are asking you about what you think of the student council in your own school. Please give a score to each of your answers using the following as a guide. It is important that you answer every question. Thank you.

Strongly agree = 5,   **Agree = 4,**   **Disagree = 2,**   **Strongly disagree = 1**

Quality in Education

1) Through the student council, the students have a voice in the school. _____

2) The student council has an important role to play in schools. _____

3) Student self-confidence is developed by a student council. _____

4) Student councils improve the quality of education on offer in schools. _____

5) The quality of the daily lives of students in schools is improved by a student council. _____

Equality in Education.

6) All groups in the school should have equal access to the student council. _____

7) Equality should be an important issue for a student council. _____

8) By having a student council students will be consulted when new school policies are being considered. _____

9) Every class should have equal representation on the student council. _____

10) The student council should highlight the principle of equality. _____

Partnership in Education.

11) A student council gives the students some say in the running of the school _____

12) Students are consulted through the student council. _____

13) The student council is part of the "Partnership in Education". _____

14) The student council brings the concerns of the students to management. _____

15) The students learn to negotiate through the workings of the student council. _____

<u>Strongly agree</u> = 5,   <u>Agree</u> = 4,   <u>Disagree</u> = 2,   <u>Strongly disagree</u> = 1

Pluralism in Education.

16) Minority groups in the school should be represented on the council. _____

17) The student council values each student in the school. _____

18) The student council should celebrate the diversity of students. _____

19) The student council should encourage pluralism in the school. _____

20) The student council should make sure that all ability groups in the school are

represented on the student council. _____

Accountability in Education.

21) Management should be prepared to explain their actions to the students through the student

council. _____

22) Having a student council makes students more accountable for their own actions . _____

23) Having a student council makes management more accountable to students. _____

24) Being accountable for the actions of its own council, makes students aware of some of the

problems of management. _____

25) A student council makes students more aware of their own responsibilities

within the school. _____

Your own student council.

26) The student council in this school is very successful. _____

27) Management listens to our student council. _____

28) Our student council represents the students well. _____

29) The students in this school support their council. _____

30) Being a member of the student council gives a person status among his/her peers. _____

31) List 3 key words or phrases that you would associate with <u>a successful</u> student council.

_____

_____

_____

32) List 3 key words or phrases that you would associate with an <u>unsuccessful</u> student council.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

33) What do you think should be the role of a student council in an Irish post

primary school?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank You

Appendix 4
Letter to Interviewees

3, Riverside,
Church Road,
Carrigaline,
Co. Cork.

Tel./Fax   021 4372831

Email ogormana.ias@eircom.net

date

Dear

Following our telephone conversation I would like to thank you for agreeing to an interview. It is very important to my research on student councils and I am very appreciative of your help.

As you recall I sent a postal questionnaire to all the post primary schools in Cork last October and I must follow that up with a series of interviews. My research question centres around whether a student council can/does help to deliver quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability in education. I enclose a copy of the interview guide for you to look at.

I would like to use a tape recorder as an aid to my memory and, also, to allow me to concentrate on the interview itself. I will send you a summary of the interview afterwards for your approval. Everything you say will be confidential. Only I will be able to identify who said what.

I also enclose 30 copies of the student questionnaire. It is completely anonymous. I would appreciate it if the 5th year teacher would facilitate you in getting them to complete it. I could collect them when we meet if that is convenient.

I can't stress enough how grateful I am for your help, without which I could not complete my work.

I will see you on--

Yours sincerely,

<center>

Appendix 5

<u>Interview guide</u>

</center>

Name_____

Date_____ Time_____

School_____

Q1   Tell about your involvement with the student council in the school.

As you know my research centres around the idea that a student council might help to deliver quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability within a school.

Q 2   How do you believe a student council can contribute to the <u>quality</u> of education on offer in Irish Post primary schools?

_____

_____

_____

Q 3   How do you believe a student council can contribute to <u>equality</u> of education on offer in Irish Post primary schools?

_____

_____

_____

Q 4   How do you believe a student council can contribute to <u>partnership</u> in the education on offer in Irish Post primary schools?

_____

_____

_____

Q 5   How do you believe a student council can contribute to <u>pluralism</u> in the education on offer in Irish Post primary schools?

_____

_____

_____

Q 6   How do you believe a student council can contribute to <u>accountability</u> in the education on offer in Irish Post primary schools?

_____

_____

_____

Q 7 What would you see as the major obstacles to a student council delivering –

        Quality

        Equality

        Partnership

        Pluralism

        Accountability

Q 8 So, overall, your attitude to the possibility of a student council helping to deliver these key considerations within a school is positive/negative.

_____

_____

_____

Q 9 Name 3 things a school could do that would support a student council.

_____

_____

_____

Do you want to elaborate on any of these?

_____

_____

_____

Q10 Name 3 key people within the school whose support of the student council is

essential for

its success.

_____

_____

_____

Q11 How do you see student councils functioning in Irish post primary schools in

10 years time?

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for talking to me. I'll send on a summary of the interview for you to look at as soon as possible.

Appendix 6
Interview Summaries
Interview 1

26th February, 2002
approx. 35 mins

The interview took place in a classroom in the school during lunchtime. The interview guide had been given a few days previously. Helen was relaxed and informative. Helen's involvement with the student council carries over many years. Her particular interest is in how her classes in CSPE can relate to the working of the council within the school. She stresses the use and example of the democratic procedure that is available to them through the student council. She pointed out that some students are very sceptical about the effectiveness of a council.

Quality   Helen said that the student council definitely contributed to improving the quality of the everyday lives of the students. It improved the facilities for the students e.g. lockers, chocolate machine. In the wider context, she felt that the council had little involvement in areas to do with the curriculum or subject choices.

(Technical difficulty resulting in the transcript having to be completed from memory.)

Equality   This should be an issue for every group of students, whether all female or mixed. However, within a school there is a pecking order and, although the students have a say in many situations, their voice is small. They are not an equal part in any discussion within the school or the classroom. Overall, the activities of the student council will make the students aware of the issue of equality and how to seek information and follow procedures to ensure equality while bearing in mind the unequal nature of the world within which they are operating. Equality is, perhaps, only an ideal.

Partnership. Here again the unequal nature of the partnership in education was discussed. The conclusion reached was that, of course students are a "lesser" part of the partnership. They are still young, still learning and in need of guidance. But their opinions should still be sought on matters that effect their lives and subsequent decisions should be explained to them in line with their age and experience.

Pluralism. The discussion centred on the meaning of the word and how it effects the everyday lives of students. The student council has a role to play here in making sure that all students have access to the student council. The needs of weaker ability students should be kept in mind. In Irish post primary schools, this is, perhaps, the most relevant aspect of pluralism for the student council. Minority groups within the school, e.g. travellers, should be consulted as to whether they want their "different" culture highlighted or whether they wanted to blend into the background of the school. Similarly, pupils of different religions. The feelings of the minorities must be considered before we try to "celebrate diversity".

Accountability Accountability starts with the student council itself. It must be accountable for its own actions, funds etc. The council must not just point out the deficiencies in their school lives but must go further and come up with possible, workable solutions. This would have a positive effect on the accountability of the council itself. The council, too, must always bear in mind, not only the rights of the pupils, but also their responsibilities. Helen pointed that the word "accountability" creates fear in staff and that this is a very real factor of which the council must take account. But she sees no reason why a teacher or the principal should not be asked (politely) to explain decisions or customs that concern students.

Obstacles Time is the big problem. Who is going to do this work and when? The student council is basically an extra curricular activity and very time consuming. It must be guided by a staff member in order to set procedures and to ensure continuity.

But the time given to it, inside or outside the timetable, will reflect the value the school places on the opinions of the students. Also, Helen pointed out that the Department of Education needs to set the example. They have given student councils a place in the Education Act but there are no guidelines and no resources. This shows how serious the Dept. is about the whole matter.

Overall   Overall, Helen was positive about the ability of a student council contributing to the five considerations under discussion. But she is a little cynical able where the control of the council lies.

Support   Time allowed for student councils

Value the work openly

Encourage reports, notice board etc.

Transparency

Key People   Principal

Staff

Head girl – quality of leadership shown

Future   Positive very good experience and preparation for life.

Possibility of a national student council, but it would need adult guidance

and then there is a question about who is actually running it.

Extend the idea to primary schools e.g. circle time.

2nd Interview – approx. 35 mins
Tues. 5th March 2002
Involvement Owen has just handed over the student council to William this year.

They jointly answered the questions. An elected student council has been running for approx. 3 years. William has had 2 meetings with them.

Quality   At first it was felt that the council had no role to play in delivering quality of education but as the area was teased out, it was concluded that a good, active council would improve the quality of the everyday lives of the students, thus improving the general quality of education in the school. This could be most effective in areas such as sport. They would have no role in such areas as the curriculum.

Equality   This is an all boys' school so it was felt that gender equality was not an issue. But that there would be a role for the council in equality with regard to minority groups within the school. It was recorded that it was not the high flyers who were active in the council, rather the middle of the road students. The less able students were active but the very weak were inclined not to be involved. One student, who uses a wheelchair, has a high profile in the school. There is another youth leadership group active in the school.

Partnership   With regard to the area of partnership, the students have already taken an active role in the writing of a school's drug policy and the school code of conduct. They were equal partners with the parents and teachers in writing the drugs' policy and they acquitted themselves extremely well.

Pluralism   Pluralism was discussed with regard to physical, cultural and religious differences. It was felt that students who are "different" usually want to blend in in the school and do not want their differences highlighted. However, a student council would be on the lookout to see that these students are treated equally and fairly by the school community. Mention was made of a student in a wheelchair, one from Afganistan, those of the Muslim religion and our own itinerants. The greatest aggression is shown towards the itinerants. This was "in general", and not apparent in the school community itself. It was felt that there was a role here for the council, although they might not apply the term "pluralism" to what they were doing.

Accountability   It was felt quite strongly here that students must start with their own accountability. When they take on responsibility for that, then they could understand the implications for accountability in teachers.

(Tape ran out here so the rest is written from memory)

Obstacles   The greatest obstacle to a successful student council is apathy and lack of commitment on the side of the students themselves. Time is also a problem. Students are not willing to give their own time. They are very willing to come out of class! Unless the students commit themselves the student council will not be a success.

Overall   Overall the conclusion was positive, a student council could help to deliver the five key considerations. The extent of that delivery would vary from year to year, depending on the level of commitment of the students.

Support   Give the council status

                          Listen to the students and facilitate them

                          Give them success where possible

Key personnel   Principal

                          Teacher co-ordinator

Future   In ten years student councils will be much as they are today, their success will vary from year to year depending on their level of commitment. There will be no incremental progression because of the transient nature of the school population.

Interview 3
6ᵗʰ March.

Involvement   Séamus has been involved with the student council in his school for about 3 years. The extent of his involvement has petered off over the last year, for various reasons.

Quality   Yes, a student council could encourage pride in one's school and this would have a knockon effect on the quality of education. The student council could encourage participation in school, too, and this also would impinge favourably on quality.

Equality   All boys school and so gender equality was not an issue. The school is streamed and it is the top ability students who take on the task of running a council. In sport there is equality of opportunity. Selection for teams is open to everyone. There are class elections for the student council.

Partnership   A student council gives the students a voice in the school. The principal can deal with the council not just random groups of students. Last year when the school was reviewing the code of conduct, the council played an active role and their voice was heard. The school plan will consult the students through the council. They will be heard, although not necessarily get what they wanted.

Pluralism   The school is a very homogeneous community. The students who are "different" do not want to be noticed. They want to blend in. Management would be aware of minorities in the school but would not highlight them. Overall, there is no real role for pluralism within the school.

Accountability   Accountability by whom to whom?? It must start with the student council itself. The principal would leave it to the teacher co ordinator to keep an eye on the activities of the council.

Obstacles   The greatest obstacle is lack of staff support. They have other priorities. Staff need time, perhaps make it a Post of Responsibility. Then the staff member would feel obliged to deliver. Perhaps there is a role here for parents. From the students' point of view, they are reluctant to give time outside school, except for the higher ability students who would be more willing to commit themselves outside of school time.

Overall   Positive on quality and partnership. On the other 3 there is no real role for a student council.

Support   Make it a P.O.R. to give continuity to the council and encourage the teacher involved.

Give the council a budget of its own

Some reward for the participating students, something that they would value themselves. This might counter student apathy.

Key people   Principal

Teacher co ordinator

Staff generally.

Future   The formal status given to the council by the Education Act should ensure continuity. Students will get more involved. The staff will give more support since they will have to have a council. It will be like the Parents' council, it will get better with time and experience. It will increase the pressure on Leaving Cert. Students.

Interview 4

Wed. 20ᵗʰ March 2002

approx time – 45 mins

Mary has been involved with the student council for 3-4 years. She set the council up in the school. She has attended seminars sponsored by the EU & CSPE where citizenship and democracy training were discussed.

Quality   The activities and experience of a student council within a school will add to the quality of education if we consider that education is more than a group of subjects. If we approach education holistically then a student council has much to offer. A council will lead to greater and more pertinent questioning by students, especially of methodologies, and this in turn will lead to improvements. However the students need

guidance in these matters and training. Councils may develop in a direction that teachers will not like and that will cause teachers to look again at the way they operate. A council should improve relations between students and staff. A student council will help develop self confidence in students.

Equality   The school is a mixed school and Mary says that equality between the sexes is quite accepted and taken for granted within the school. In regard to equality of students and staff, that is a different matter. If we are to take partnership seriously then the issue of equality between staff and students needs to be addressed. The pyramid model of school management needs to be altered more in favour of the students. Management need to reach out to the pupils on this issue.Equality of representation on the council. In this school the representation is weighted in favour of the seniors and this seems to be working. Maybe the lack of interest in the council among juniors is caused by this weighting and maybe this needs to be re examined. There is a need to keep an open mind in regard to the functioning of the council. The "rules" can and should be changed if they are seen not to be working.Equality should also look at the social class mix of the pupils e.g. traditional L.C. pupils and LCA pupils. But this is seen as an area for the teacher co-ordinator to look at and not the council itself. Should all classes have a representative?

Partnership   (Much of this was discussed under equality) In the school where there is a student council then there is, at least, the intention of some sort of partnership with the pupils. But what sort of partnership does management want? Students cannot be full partners as they are still learning but a student council is a training for future democracy. Students, too, are a transient population and so they get a very short experience and training in democracy. School management must look for areas that they can say "yes" to the council.

Pluralism   Pluralism is accepted in the school already. By highlighting pluralism in the school, eg different races and religions, perhaps the student council does not have a role. By highlighting differences you may raise issues that are not there at the moment. Students want to blend in not highlight what is different. If the student council is to play a role in pluralism then it should be looked at school by school.

Accountability   Firstly the council must be accountable for itself. They must be responsible for whatever they undertake. As regards a council asking management to be accountable eg explaining or justifying a policy then yes. There are certain area eg a teacher in her class, and these areas are outside the mandate of the council. The manner in which the council makes an approach to management will be important. But if management is serious about partnership then they must be answerable, to some degree, to the students. A council has a role in formulating and updating such policies as school rules.

Obstacles   Obstacles to equality & partnership, the main obstacles could be the staff who are only paying lip service to the ideas. Aggressive members on the council could also be obstacles as could school management. Poor people skills play a role here on both sides. If the members of the council get disillusioned and see themselves as not really making a difference, as not being heard, then student apathy creeps in.

Overall   One must be optimistic. There are many fears and apprehensions but there are great possibilities if management follow through in a sincere manner. Management must give

recognition to the council and be seen to listen and to deliver.

Key people   Co ordinator

Principal & Deputy

Staff

Future   Councils will become more like a student union, like in 3rd level. They will be very successful in some schools and not so successful in others. They may become quite aggressive in their demands and much stronger as they grow and spread. There will be a national student council. There will also be a European influence. The European Council is already looking at this issue. The students should be guided and trained for their future role. We cannot stop them so we should go with them.

Interview 5
Thurs. 21st March 2002
Approx. time – 45 mins
Niamh has been the co ordinator of the student council since 1998. The council itself has been going since 1996. She sees the role of co ordinator as that of liaison between students and staff. The school was anxious to set up the council.

Quality   Yes, the council does improve the quality of education for those directly involved in the council e.g. the hands on experience. It is hard to see how the council would improve the quality for those not directly involved. Students not directly involved show a level of apathy towards the council even though the council members feedback to the classes, rather reluctantly. Students can see that it is "cool" to get on the council and "not cool" to do the work.

Equality   The choosing of the representatives is quite democratic. Some reps have been replaced for not attending meetings. Being on the council can have a positive effect on those chosen e.g. behaviour. Although sometimes tempted to "interfere" with the democratic process, it is best left alone. Juniors on the council tend not to be as vocal as the seniors but they improve as the year goes on. Gender equality is not an issue. It is lived out in the school life. They see no occasion to question it. In fact, the girls tend to do more of the work than the boys.

<u>Partnership</u>   Teachers, staff and students form the partnership. The council is the forum for this. Staff must be seen to be aware of student issues eg seating at lunch time. The council was consulted when the code of conduct was revamped recently. Through the council rules & policies can be explained. Teachers can be taken aback when students question them and, perhaps, teachers need to look at this. The manner of student questioning is important. Some staff would not accept that the students have a right to ask for explanations of rules etc. They would see this as undermining their authority.

<u>Students</u>, Cliona and Aisling discussed the voting of representatives to the council, reasons for no Head Student, Friendship Day, Daffodil Day, visit to the Dáil, badge of office, funds for the council, vending machines, notice board. Both girls were committed members of the council. They were articulate and proud of their work.

<u>Pluralism</u>   The student council could have a role to play in pluralism. The members of the council are usually a broad mix of students. The school caters for many nationalities. They tend to pal up with others with the same interests. There are also different religions in the school eg Catholic and Church of Ireland. They mix and work well together.

<u>Accountability</u>   They must learn to be accountable/responsible for their own activities firstly, then, perhaps, to question. Questioning would not always be acceptable to some staff members. A student council could teach the students how to go about questioning in an acceptable and positive manner.

<u>Obstacles</u>   Time

A Post of Responsibility on its own

Student apathy

Feedback to students

<u>Overall</u>   Positive attitude

Support   Time

Funds, from school or/and government

"Stay in School" programme could give funds

Training for staff as well as students, certain taboo areas

Key People   Principal

Teacher co ordinator

Student themselves

Future   Completely integrated into the running of the school. More active role in

policy making, involved in fund raising for the school, more in the public eye, more

independent and responsible

Interview 6
Involvement
At present there is no student council in the school. John would like to see one up and

running and hopes to set things in motion next year.

Quality   A student council provides a forum for students to voice their opinions.

They could make school authorities aware of issues and concerns regarding subject

choices, code of conduct and discipline. A student council gives students a feeling of

ownership and pride in their school and a sense of being listened to and respected thus

adding to the quality of their education.

Equality   A student council could draw attention to and could make authorities

aware of feelings of discrimination on grounds of gender, class, religion etc. Church of

Ireland students and teachers may feel excluded when only a catholic ceremony is

celebrated on school occasions. Also there is the issue of subject choices re. Boys and

girls.

<u>Partnership</u>   A student council gives students a say in decision making. They would be partners with management and parents. They could negotiate with management. It develops an atmosphere of co-operation between various age groups of students and between students and staff.

<u>Pluralism</u>   If all students have equal access to the student council and if all minority groups are represented on the council, then it leads to respect, tolerance, equal rights, democracy. It gives students an insight into the working of democracy at national level and international level, also into politics.

<u>Accountability</u>   A student council provides students with an avenue to speak to the school authorities re. Teacher or school problems and thus makes the authorities answerable to them. A council also makes students answerable for their own decisions and actions. They would be involved in decisions re. Code of conduct and so would feel a sense of ownership and would feel answerable to each other and to school staff.

<u>Obstacles</u>   Teachers could be an obstacle if they did not listen to the students. But students themselves could hinder a council if their demands were immature or excessive. In the area of equality resources are not always available to do everything and choices would have to be made. This would be a preparation for the real world. If parents and teachers do not listen to the students then partnership would be in jeopardy. Bullying would be an obstacle to pluralism and student apathy and immaturity would hinder accountability.

<u>Overall</u>   Positive – if structured properly and given the necessary time and resources.

<u>Support</u>   Provide information and initiate discussion on setting up a student council. Use the book published by the National Youth Council of Ireland.

Provide support by having a dedicated special post of responsibility to the setting up and advising of a student council.

Acknowledging their achievements.

Key People   Principal

Deputy Principal

P.O.R. co-ordinator

Future   As school planning develops, so will the involvement of students through the student councils. In 10 years time the majority of schools will have a student council.

Interview 7
20th May 2002
30 mins approx.
Involvement ; Miriam has been the co ordinator of the student council for the last four years. She oversees the election of the student council each year. There is a senior committee and then the prefect and vice prefect from each class in the school. She liaises between the council and the staff.

Quality ; Yes, a council could help deliver quality. It gives them a forum to express their opinions and to bring up matters that interest them. It gives them the opportunity to organise events, to take responsibility. That, in turn, improves the quality of their education. The quality of the council itself varies from year to year.

Equality ; In an all girls school there is little opportunity for equality issues. One issue to be concerned about is the fact that the committee is composed of all seniors. The quality of the committee, especially the head girl, will effect the degree to which the juniors feel involved. Efforts are made to involve the juniors but the degree of success depends on the quality of the committee. There is no issue between the academic and non academic students. No race issue within the school or differences in religion.

<u>Partnership</u>; The council was involved in the school plan. The students were consulted through the student council. Also in putting together the mission statement. They were also consulted about the school uniform. The school rules have not been rewritten recently but they would be consulted in such an event.

<u>Pluralism</u>; What exactly does it mean? After some discussion, it was decided that pluralism is not an issue within the school, not an issue for students. It may be an issue for management or the Department, but not the students. It may become an issue if/when Ireland becomes a pluralist society.

<u>Accountability</u>; Yes. Standards are set for the prefects and vice prefects. They must live up to these standards in their own school lives. This makes them accountable. They are accountable to their peers too, in that they have the responsibility to make the students feel represented and listened to on the council. The council makes the teachers more open to listening to what the students want, eg the vending machine. At first the teachers just said "no" but gradually they listened to the students and started to ask themselves "why not". The staff is now more open to the ideas of the students. The students then had to take on the responsibility of recycling the bottles from the machine. It is very good for student morale to see the results of the council lobbying. The funding from the machine, the students must be responsible for that too and decide how to use it, to keep accounts etc.

<u>Obstacles</u> How active the council is and is seen to be, this can an obstacle or an asset. The students must see them as active. If they are seen not to be effective, it has a negative effect on the council. Equality between seniors and juniors, this may need to be looked at, but will that make the committee too cumbersome? If the committee is too big then it will not be effective. How to get around this, maybe include 4th years on the committee. Would a separate senior and a junior committee work?

Partnership – do the students see the council as being part of a partnership? What areas would the students themselves choose to be partners in. There will never be an equal partnership, but students must be seen to be listened to by the senior partners.

In the area of accountability, to what degree does everyone need to be accountable? There needs to be a degree of trust.

Overall; Positive. The students must be given some of their demands, must be seen to be effective.

Support; Staff must look more objectively at the students requests, be more open to their ideas, support the projects that the students themselves want to follow. They must be provided with the resources to fulfil their role.

Key Personnel   Coordinator

                         Principal

                         Staff

Future;   It is a growth area. Student councils will become an integral part of the school. They are what school is all about.

Appendix 7

Graph 1 General staff attitudes to the student council.

How would you describe general staff attitudes to the student council?
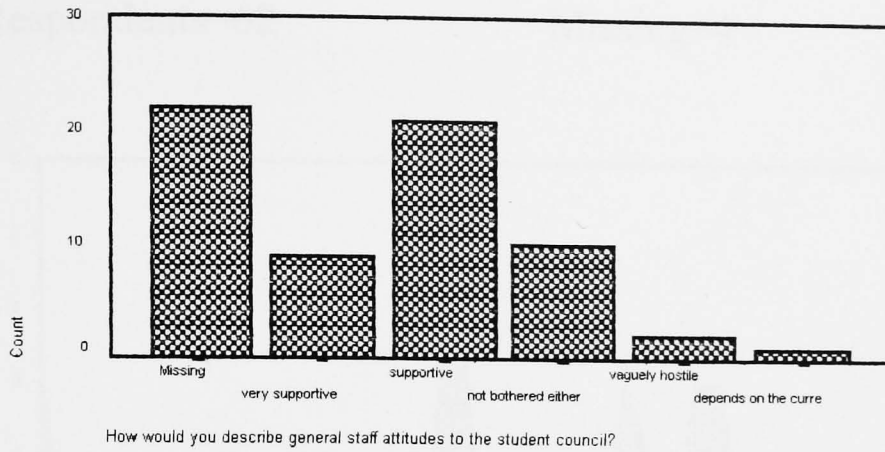
Graph 2 The principal's attitude to the student council.

How would you describe the principal's attitude to the student council?
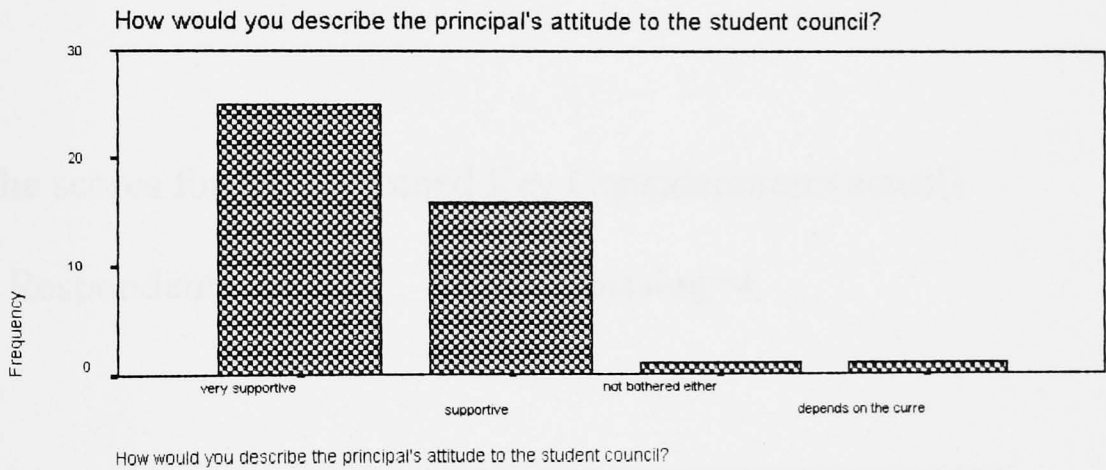
Graph 3 The position of the student councils in the schools.

How would you describe the position of the student council in your schoo
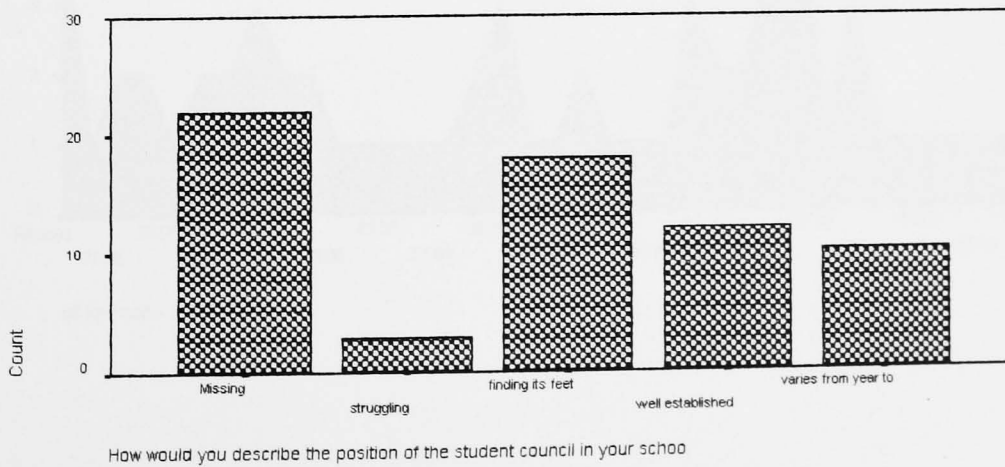
Appendix 8

Graph 4 The scores for the combined Key Considerations(ideal)

Respondents=62   Missing=4

all key con - ideal
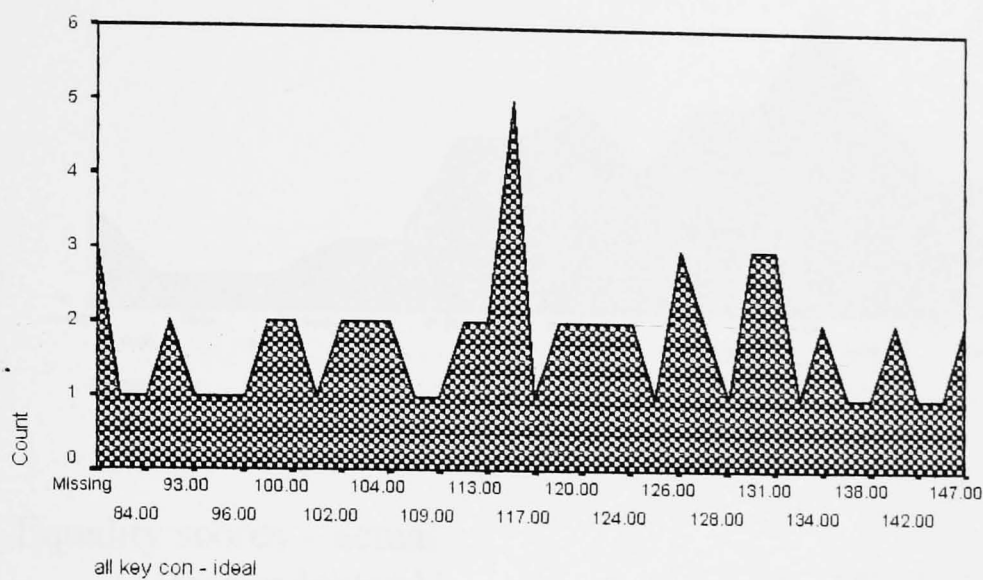
Graph 5 The scores for the combined Key Considerations(actual)

Respondents=61   missing=4

all key con - actual
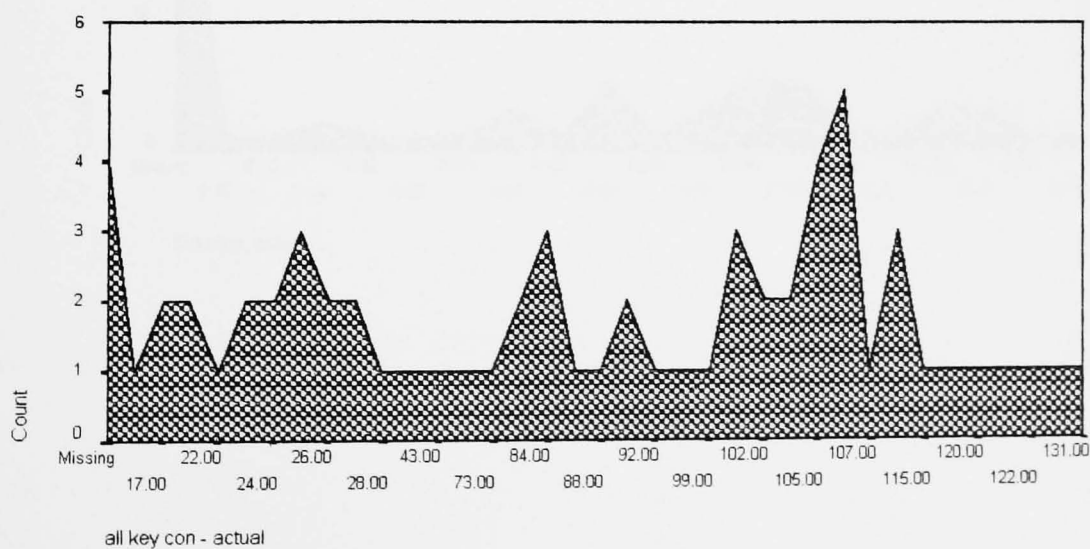
Appendix 9

Graph 6 Equality scores - ideal
Respondents=60   Missing=5
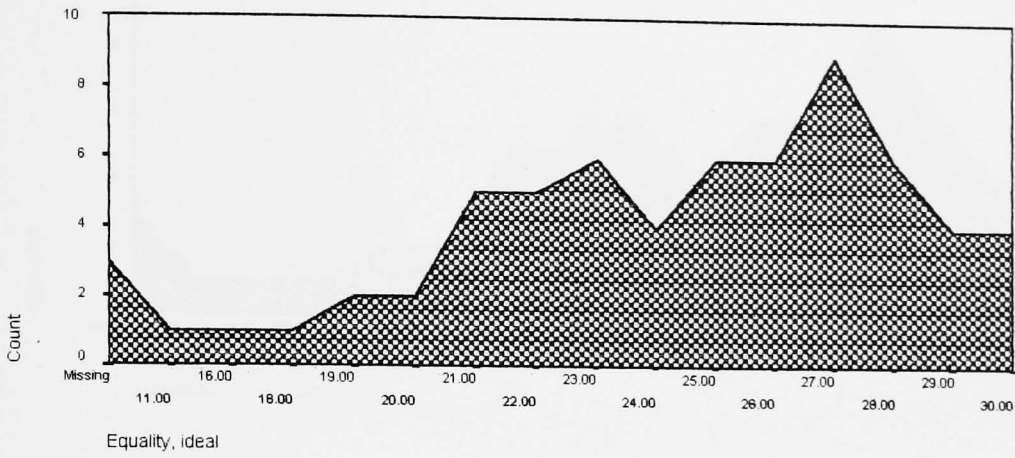
Equality, ideal

Graph 7 Equality scores – actual
Respondents=41   Missing=24
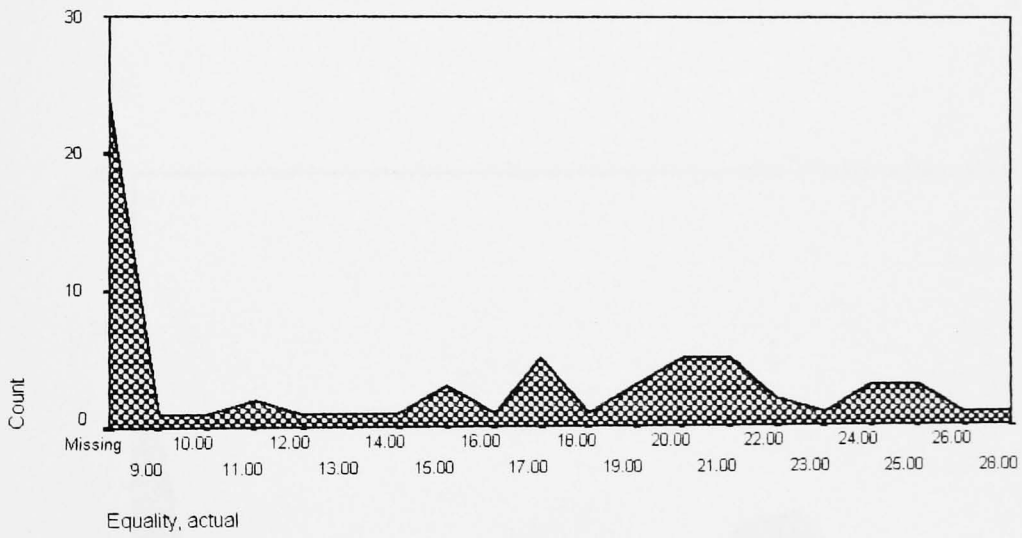
Equality, actual

Graph 8 Quality scores – ideal
Respondents=60   Missing=5
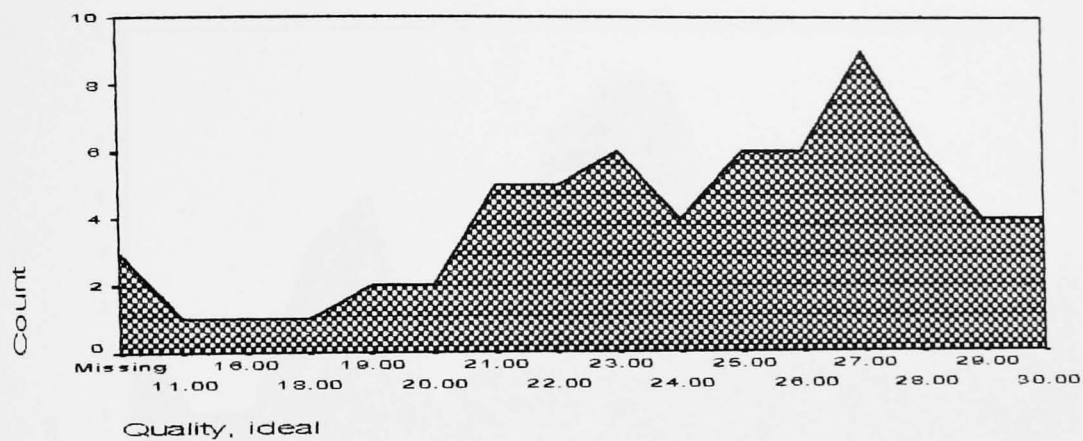
Quality, ideal

Graph 9 Quality scores – actual
Respondents=41   Missing=24

Quality, actual
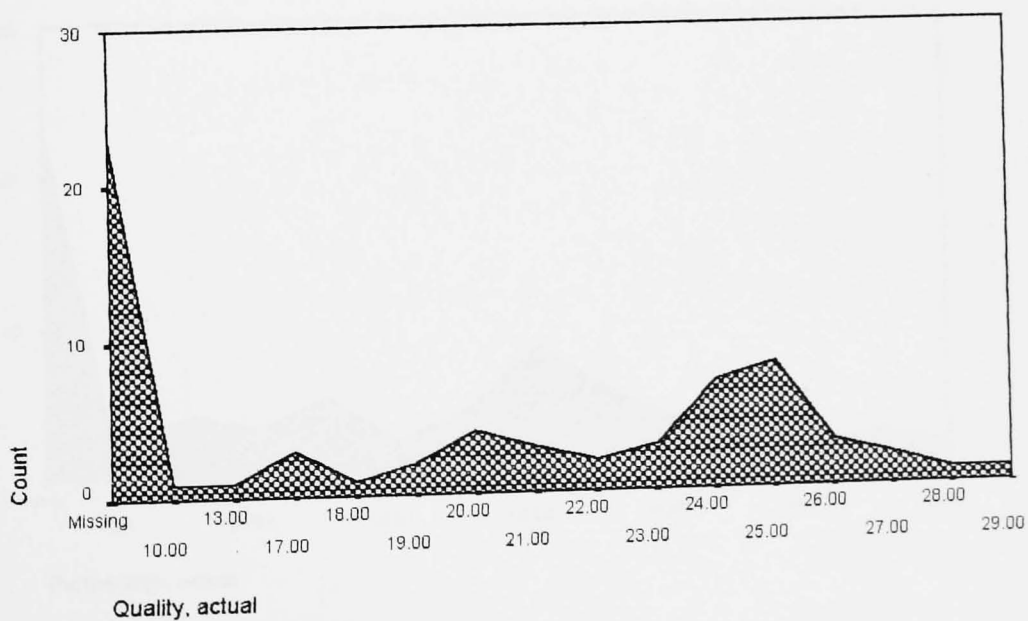
Graph 10 Partnership scores – ideal
Respondents=61   Missing=4
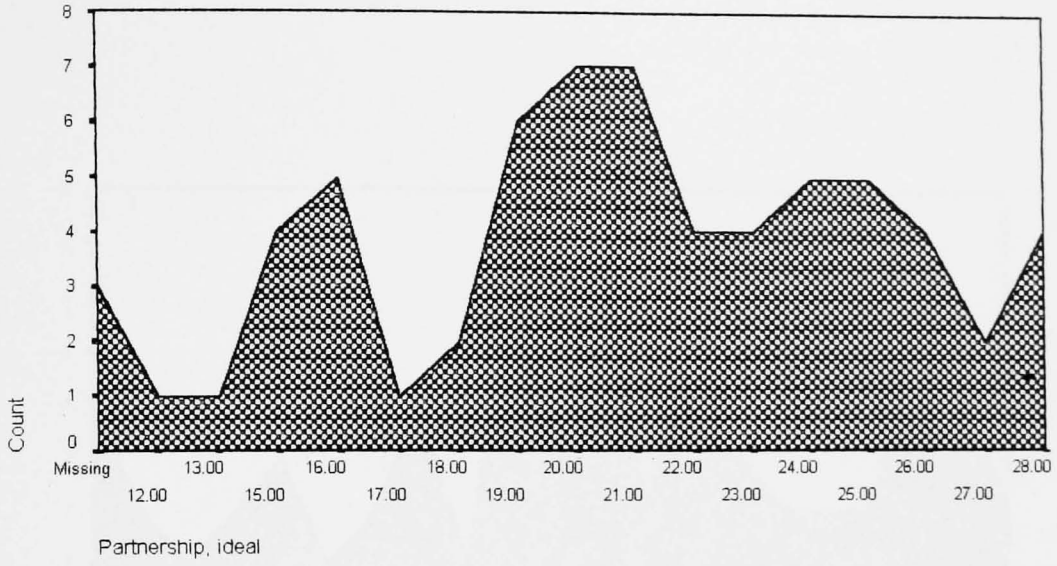
Partnership, ideal

Graph 11 Partnership scores – actual

Respondents=41   Missing=24

Partnership, actual

184
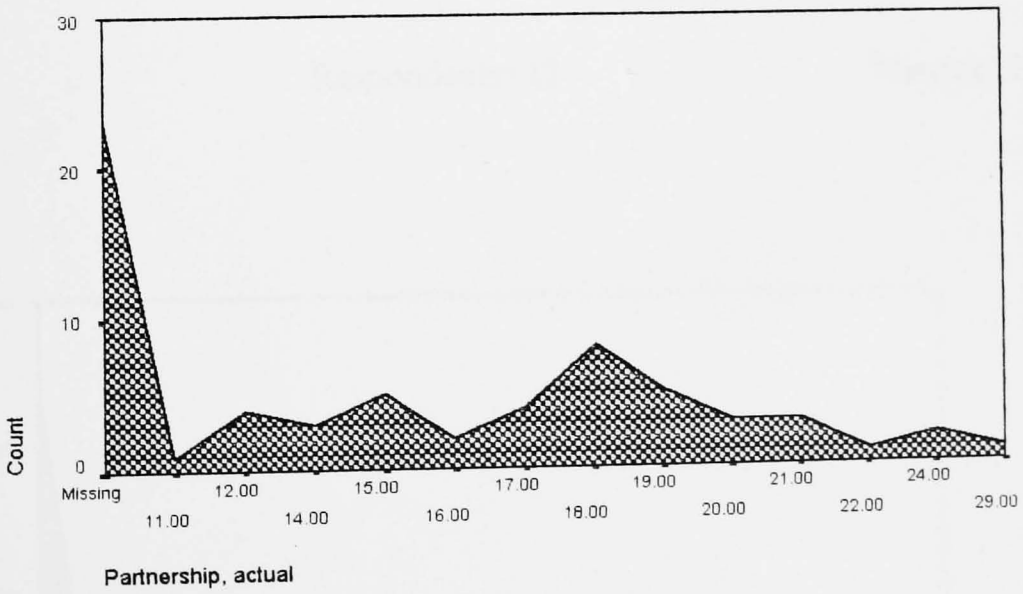
Graph 12 Pluralism scores - ideal

Respondents=62   Missing=3
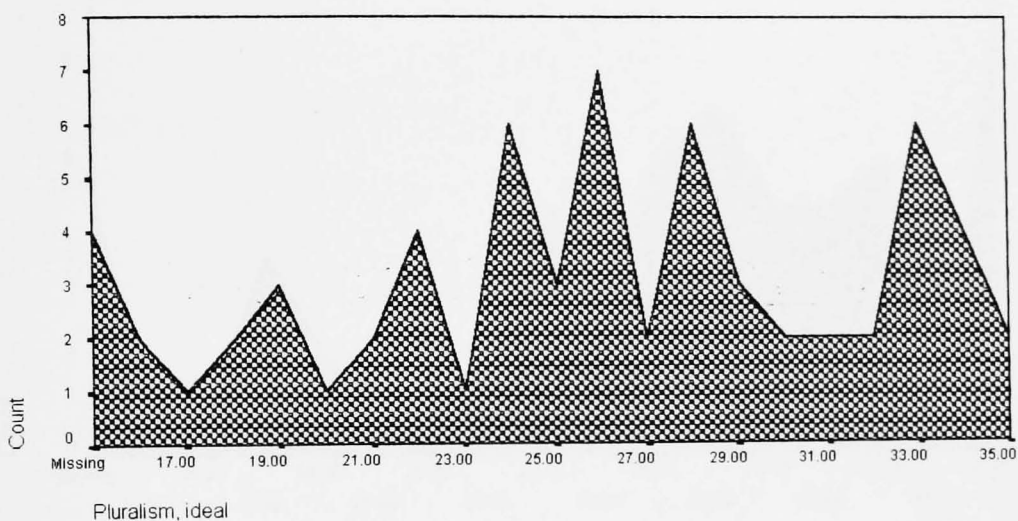
Pluralism, ideal

Graph 13 Pluralism scores – actual

Respondents=42   Missing=23

Pluralism, actual

185
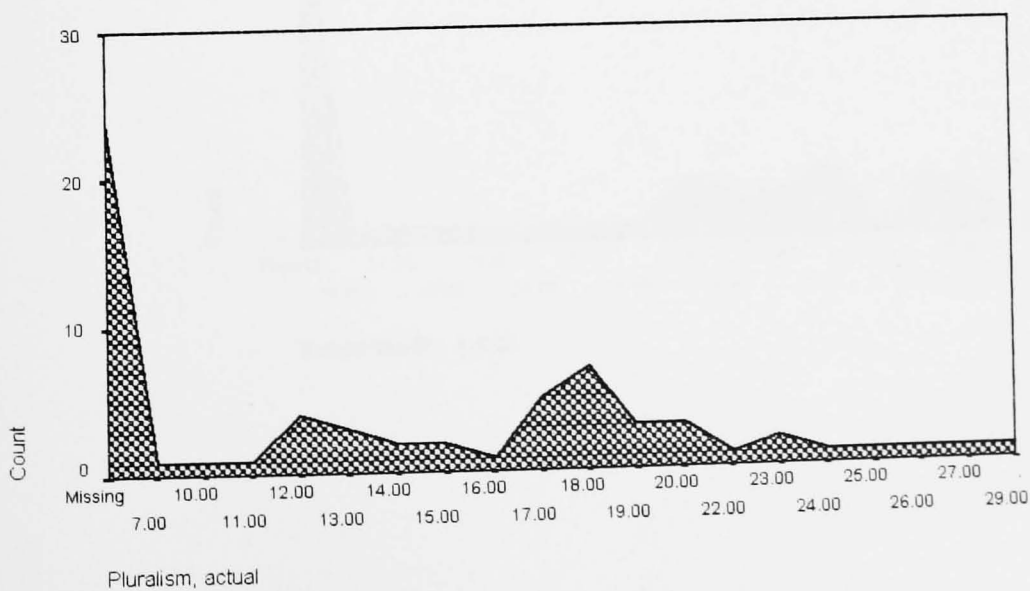
Graph 14 Accountability scores - ideal

Respondents=62   Missing=3

Accountability, ideal
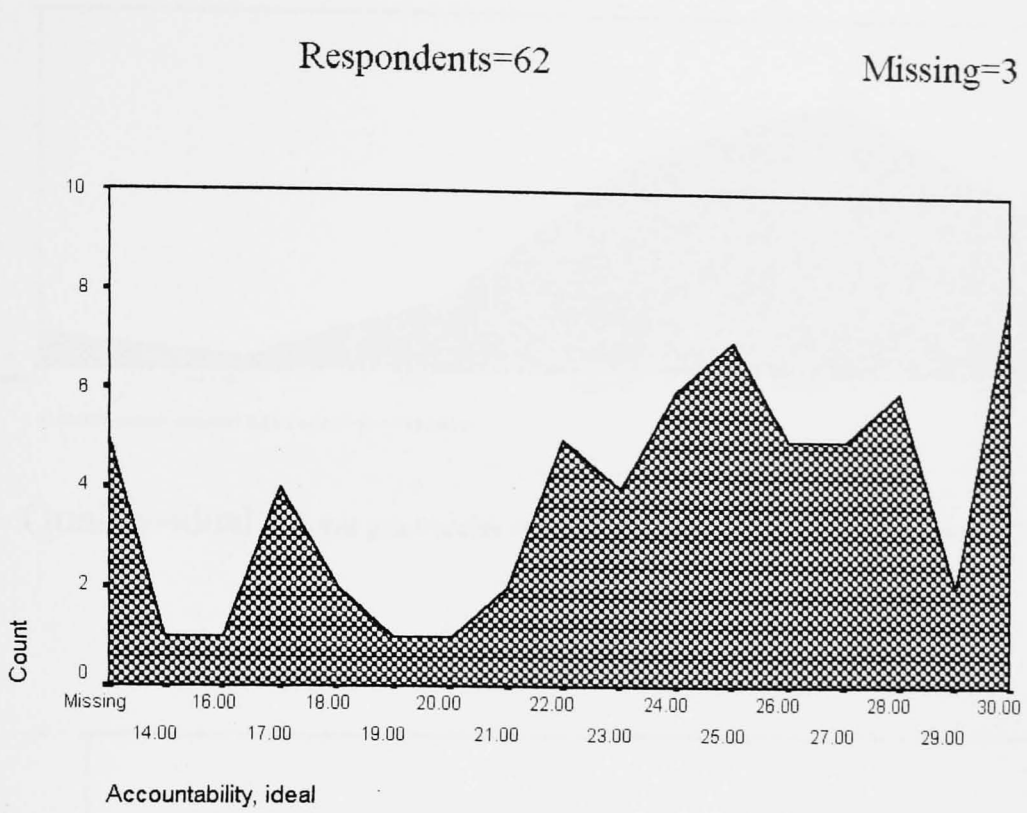
Graph 15 Accountability scores - actual

Respondents=42   Missing=23

Accountability, actual
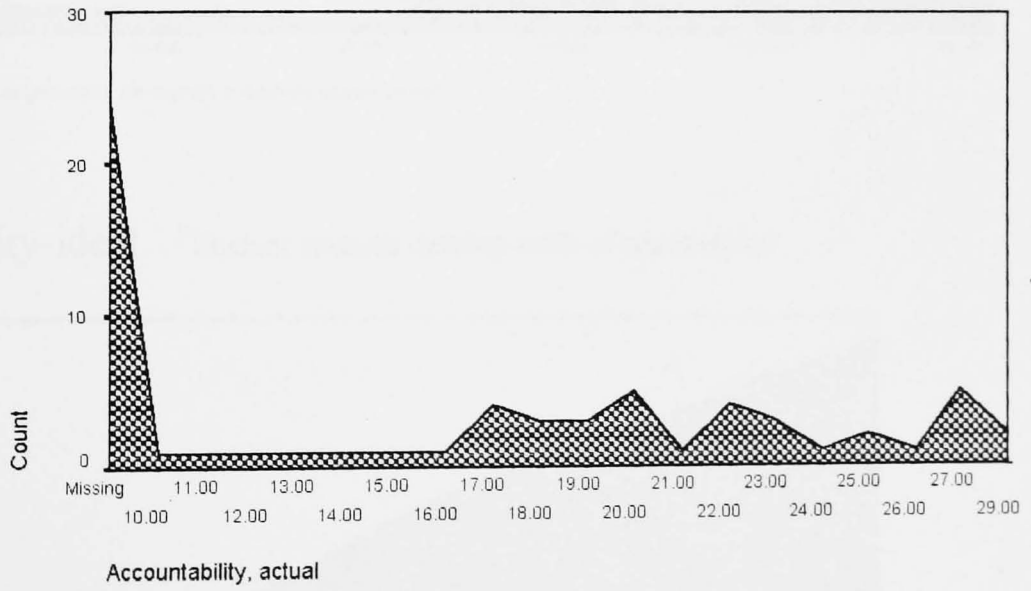
Appendix 10

Graph 16; Quality-ideal. "A student council increases pupil commitment to education"

A student council increases pupil commitment to education.
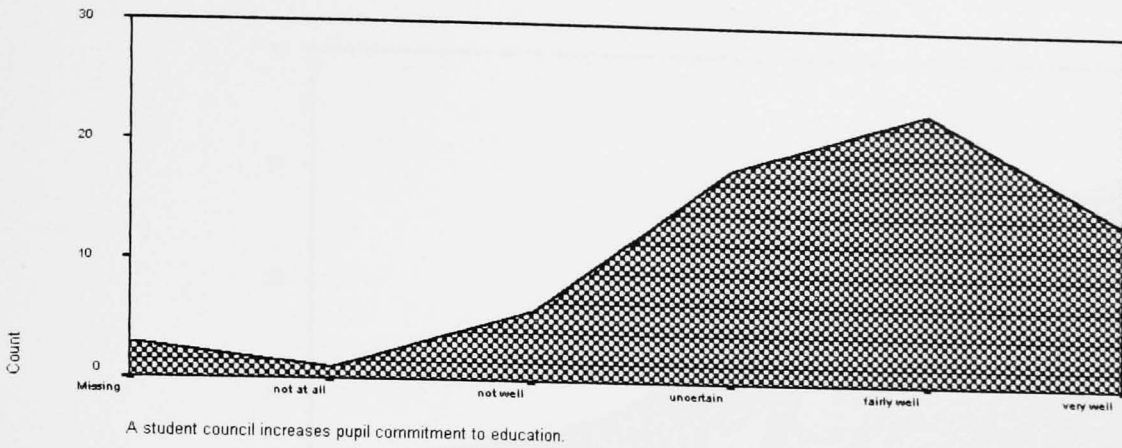
Graph 17; Quality-ideal. " Pupil grievances are resolved through the student council."

Pupil grievances are resolved through the student council.
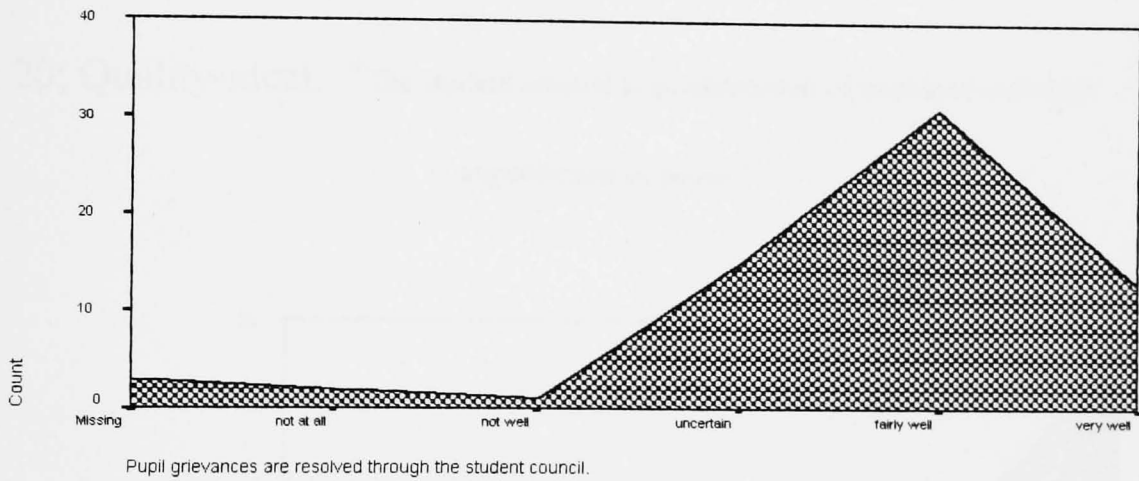
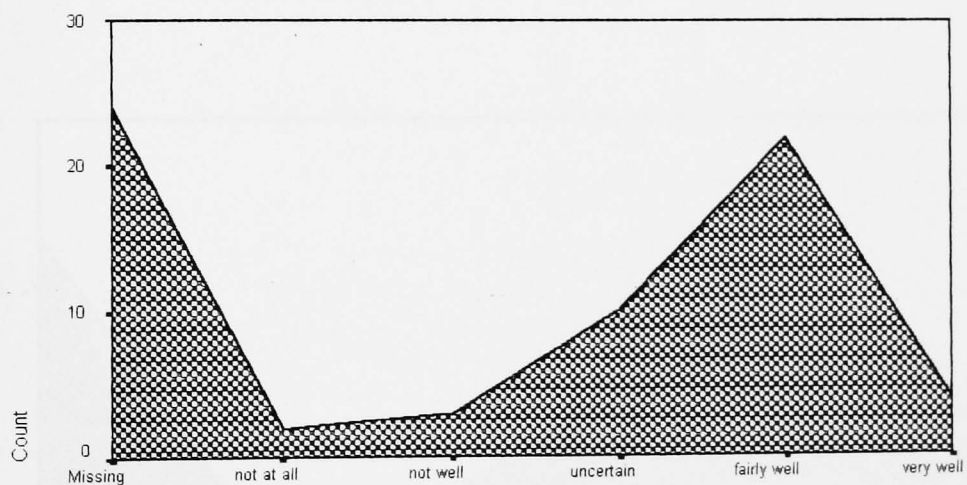## Graph 18; Quality-ideal. "Student councils develop skills of negotiation."

Student councils develop skills of negotiation.
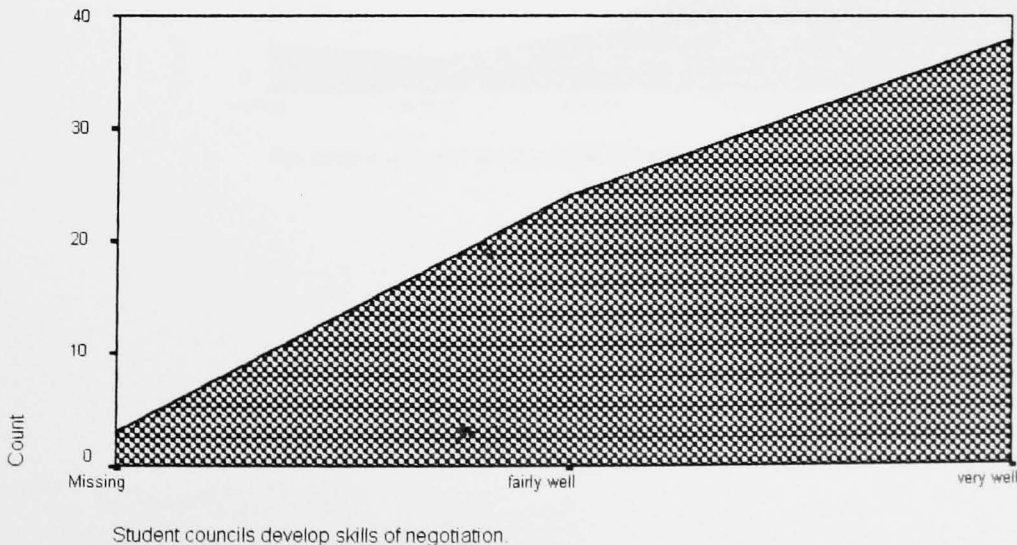
Graph 19; Quality-ideal. "Mutual respect between pupils and staff is created through the

student council."

Mutual respect between pupils and staff is created through the student c
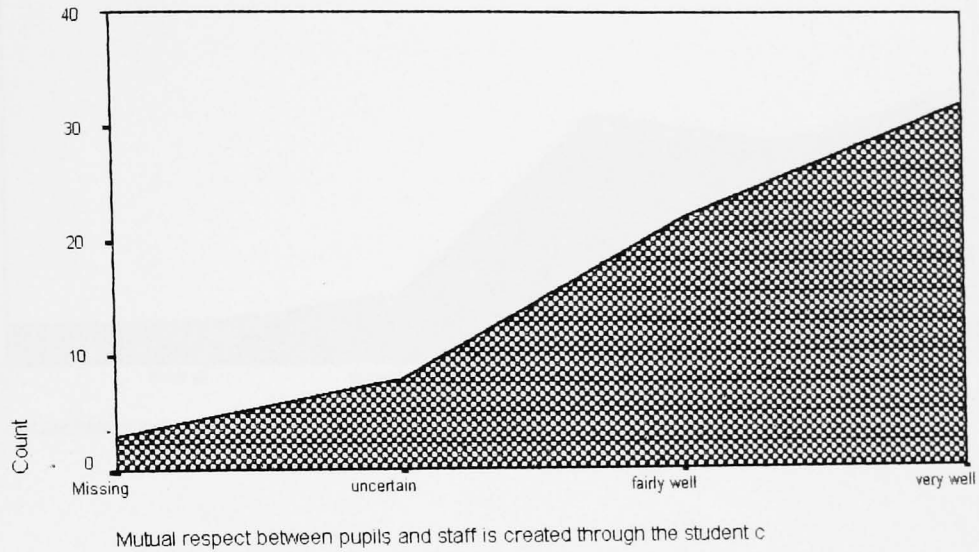
Graph 20; Quality-ideal. "The student council is an expression of management's high

expectations of pupils."

The student council is an expression of managements' high expectations o
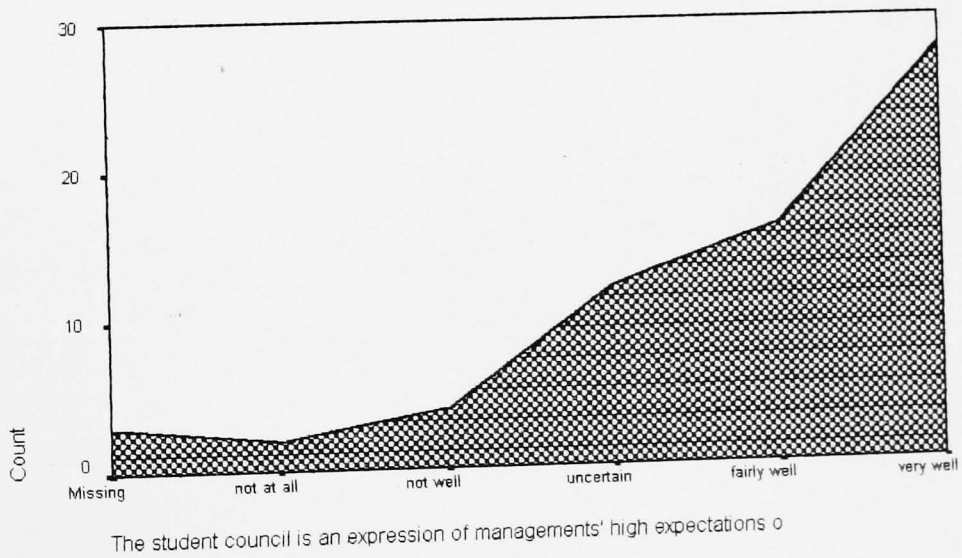
Graph 21; Quality-ideal. "Self confidence is developed amongst all pupils by a student council."
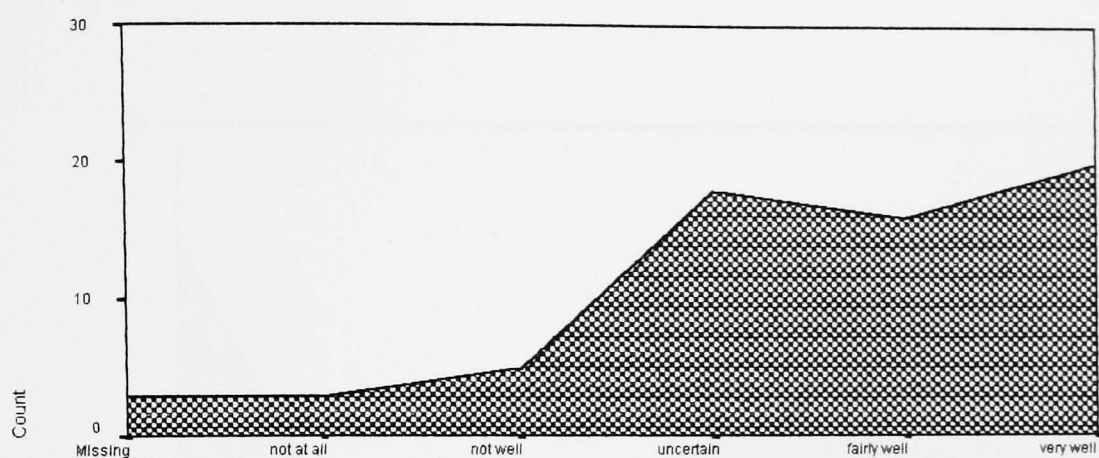
Self confidence is developed amongst all pupils by a student council.

Appendix 11

Graph 22; Quality-actual "A student council increases pupil commitment to education."
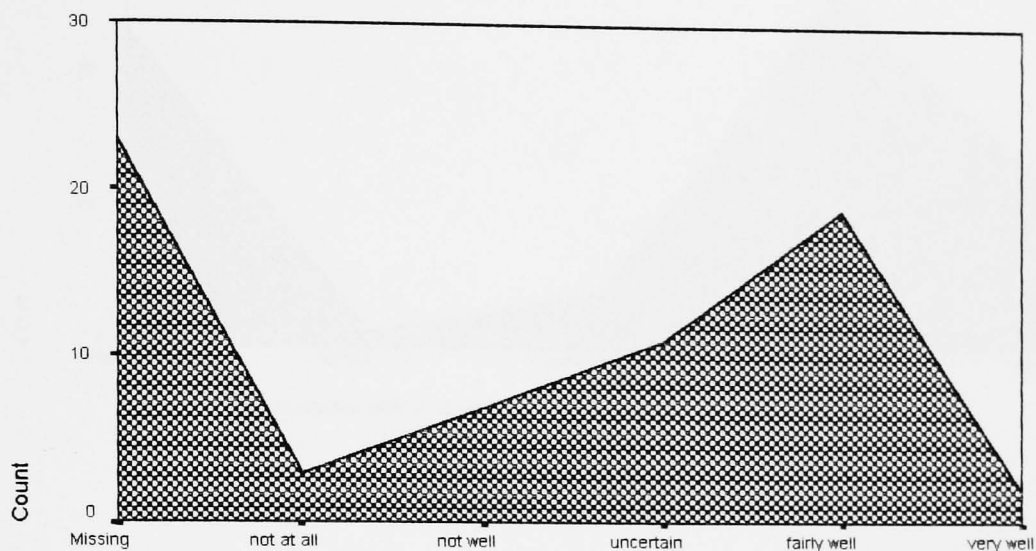
De-A student council increases pupil commitment to education.

Graph 23; Quality-actual "Pupil grievances are resolved through the student council."


De-Pupil grievances are resolved through the student council.

Graph 24; Quality-actual "Student councils develop skills of negotiation."

De-Student councils develop skills of negotiation.
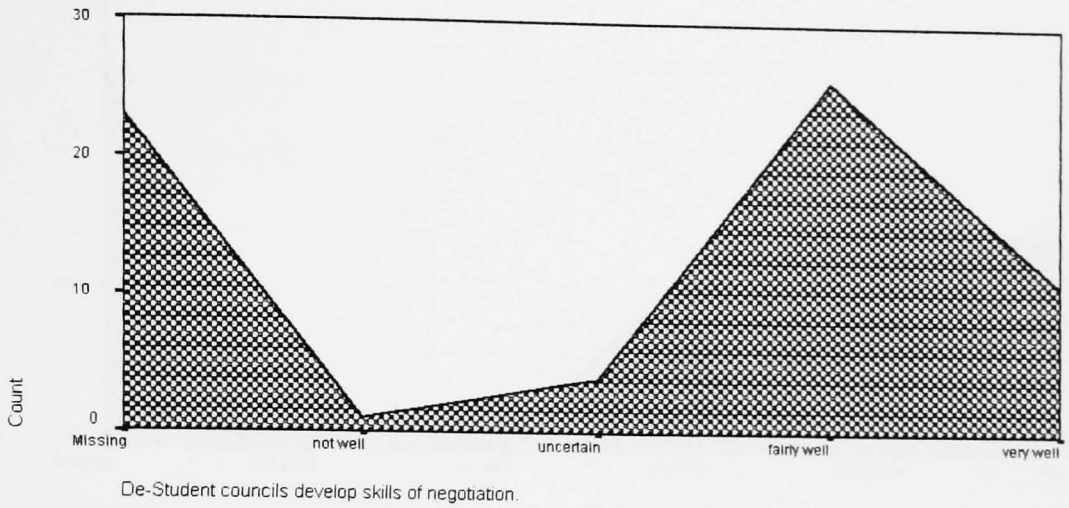
Graph 25; Quality-actual "Mutual respect between pupils and staff is created through the
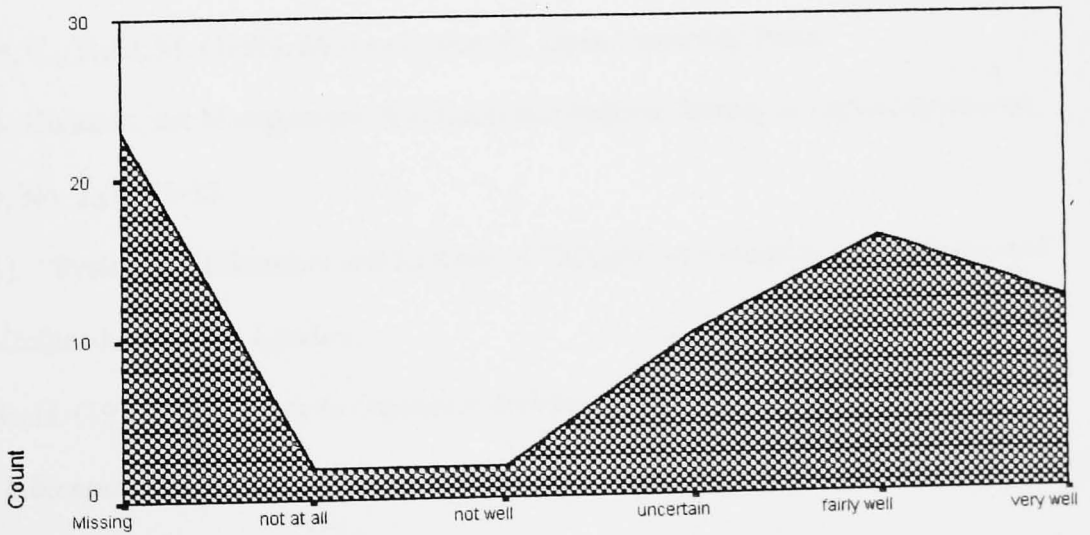
student council."

De-Mutual respect between pupils and staff is created through the studen
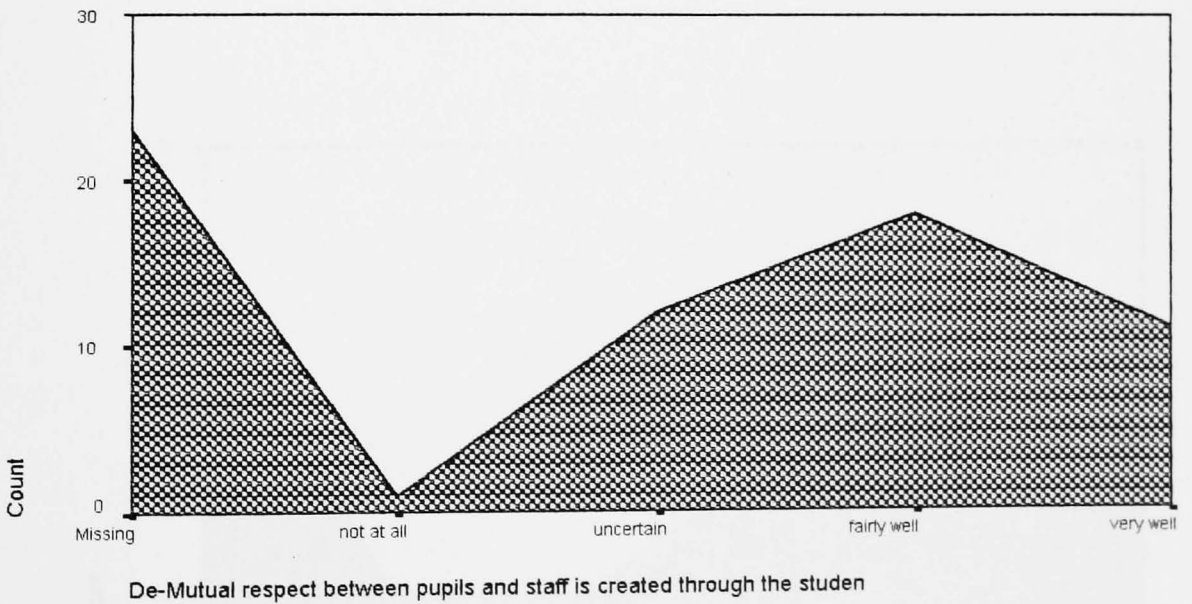
Graph 26; Quality-actual "The student council is an expression of management's high expectations of pupils."
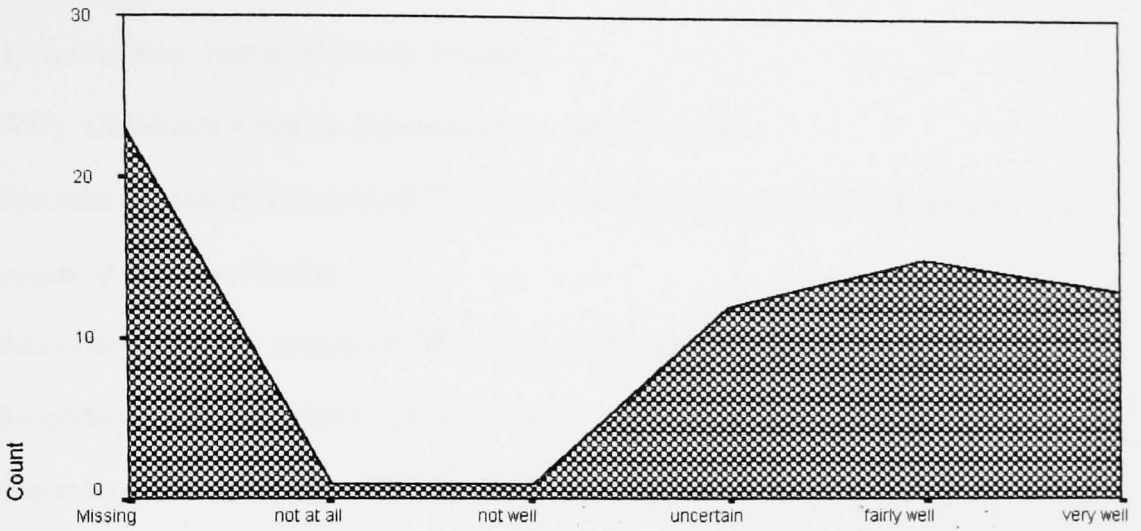
De-The student council is an expression of managements' high expectation

Graph 27; Quality-actual "Self confidence is developed amongst all students by a student council."

De-Self confidence is developed amongst all pupils by a student council.

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