Researching Pupils' Perspectives: What are the Quality Indicators of a Good School?

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Abstract

This paper will report on research that sought a new perspective on quality assurance by engaging pupils as assessors. The main purpose of the study was to understand how Maltese pupils judge schools and to provide knowledge on how better-quality schools could be designed. The research adopted a mixed methods approach. The quantitative research tool was a questionnaire survey with 1618 pupils. Qualitative data was collected through focus group sessions with pupils, group interviews with Student Councils and interviews with Heads of Schools and policymakers. Data was collected from a total of 42 state schools. One of the main findings was a pupil-generated list of the quality indicators of a good school. The study showed that pupils, Heads of Schools, and policymakers are all in favour of the concept of pupils as assessors of schools; however, there are a number of shortcomings that need to be addressed before the process can be effectively implemented in Maltese schools.

Keywords

Pupil Voice, Quality Assurance of Schools, Mixed Methods Research, Educational Leadership

Introduction

This article reports on a large-scale mixed methods study that was carried out to explore how Maltese pupils gauge state schools. The data was collected over a period of two and a half years: from March 2014 to August 2016, from a total of 42 state schools. The article gives more prominence, over other data sets, to the quantitative data collected from pupils, whilst providing an overview of what the research project entailed.

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Statement of Problem

Concurrently, schools and wider society recognise that children and young people are not passive recipients, but they have a voice that should, and which needs, to be heard. This is also recognised locally. In Malta's Children's Policy (Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Solidarity, 2017, p. 23) one of the policy actions is to: "Provide all children with a stronger voice in educational matters which affects them both directly and indirectly." However, the researcher feels that in the Maltese context, there is a wide disparity between what is being said and what is being done. The researcher wanted to combine these two current agendas in Malta: the obligation to satisfy quality assurance criteria in schools, and the rhetoric of national policies that popularise children's and young people's active participation in schools and in the community, and their rights. "Traditionally, students have been overlooked as valuable resources in the restructuring of schools" (SooHoo, 1993, p. 392). Decades later, it appears that pupils are still "being overlooked" and the principal purpose of the conducted research was to change this.

The Aims of the Study

The main aim of this study was to discover the qualities of a good school, as defined by the Maltese pupil, with the ultimate aim of using this knowledge to help propose better-quality schools in Malta. From an academic perspective, this area of research strove to conflate two conceptual threads that are relevant and significant to schools: quality assurance and pupil voice.

The study also sought to uncover if, and how, different variables might be influencing pupils' judgement of schools. Pupils were asked to assess schools freely, without any interference or influence from adults, since the researcher wanted to capture the untampered pupil voice. Besides being data sources, pupils were asked to participate at a higher level; they were asked to take up the role of co-designers of the main research tool, and of co-analysts of the gathered data. The study also wanted to contextualise pupil voice in the role of assessor in Maltese schools, within the medley of other voices who already contribute to assessment of school community. To this end, Heads of Schools and policymakers were asked to participate in the study. In this way, the potential for the actualisation of the message conveyed by pupil voice as assessor into practical changes, at both school and policy levels, could be explored.

Brief Review of Literature

This concise review of literature contextualises the research area within the existing body of literature. The first part of this section gives an overview of the two main conceptual threads pertaining to the main theme of the research separately: pupil voice and quality assurance. These two foci are integrated and discussed under the theme 'pupil voice as assessor' in the latter part of this section.

Pupil Voice

Pupil voice as a concept has been created by academics. It refers to pupils' participation, contribution and influence in a school context (Mayes et al., 2019; St. John & Briel, 2017). Drawing on different definitions for pupil voice, it appears that it entails the following three aspects:

Structures to Elicit, Facilitate and Encourage Pupil Voice. Cheminais (2008, p. 6) describes pupil voice as "every way in which pupils are allowed or encouraged to voice their views or preferences". Similarly, Czerniawski (2012, p. 131) defines pupil voice as "the formal and informal processes in schools that enable all pupils to be consulted on their education". This view is echoed by Flutter (2007).

The Range Within Pupil Voice. Robinson & Taylor (2007, p. 6) describe pupil voice as "the many ways in which pupils choose to express their feelings or views about any aspect of their school or college experience". The extremes of the range within pupil voice, according to Mitra (2004, p. 251), vary from "the most basic level of youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential solutions" to "young people collaborating with adults to actually address the problems in their schools".

The Influence of Pupil Voice. This is reflected in the weight and power of pupil voice, the strength of which can be measured in its ability to bring about change; according to (Czerniawski, 2012, p. 131), pupil voice should be received with "trust, integrity and a commitment to transform education for the better". Pupil voice emanates from different ideologies on education. It intersects with a long list of philosophies and principles: democracy in education, citizenship education, person-centred education (Fielding, 2006), radical education, constructivism, postmodernist formulations of power (Taylor & Robinson, 2009), transformative education and personalised learning (Hargreaves, 2003), policy

discourse and evaluation of schools (Fleming, 2015). In turn, given the right terrain, pupil voice can infiltrate different aspects of education, including quality assurance, which will be discussed next.

Quality Assurance

The origins of quality assurance date back to the medieval craftsmen who set up guilds that had the authority to certify the quality of their goods (Richardson, 2004). Closer to our times, since mass production absolved the individual from quality control, the onus now fell on the whole system, and tighter quality control mechanisms were introduced to safeguard the quality of the products being manufactured (Sallis, 1993). Although there are a number of scholars who argue that the concept of quality assurance cannot fit an educational setting (Aspin et al., 1994; Orzolek, 2012; Sayed, 1993), an overview of the definition of quality assurance from the educational perspective is offered by Eurydice (2015, p. 13): "Policies, procedures, and practices that are designed to achieve, maintain or enhance quality in specific areas, and that rely on an evaluation process."

Rationale for 'Pupils as Assessors'

According to the researcher, the rationale for 'pupils as assessors' is four-pronged:

Schools are Created for Pupils. Stating that schools are for pupils is rhetoric. What is arguable is the type of relationship which exists between the 'school' and the 'pupil'. "Although schools are designed for children and young people, they are rarely designed in cooperation or in partnership with students" (Osler, 2010, p. 10). This apparent paradox, the distance between the 'school' and the 'pupil', might arouse one's curiosity to find out how pupils assess schools.

Pupils are Unique Critics. Pupils are in a unique position of having ample opportunities to observe and evaluate what is happening in schools (Blossing, 2005). Mitra (2006, p. 315) reminds us that pupils "possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate". In addition, according to MacBeath (2006), pupils instinctively recognise quality. Moreover, unlike other stakeholders, pupils are less likely to harbour a hidden agenda when assessing schools. Cardoso et al. (2013, p. 98) argue that adults may not always be innocent in their contributions to quality assurance exercises

because they feel that it is imposed on them and that it curbs their professional freedom. On the other hand, pupils are not burdened with these issues and this might give them an edge over other assessors.

Voice is not Enough. Pupil voice might have a lot of potential, but at the same time it has little power (Fielding, 2007). Lundy (2007, p. 927) asserts that "'voice' is not enough" and draws on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2009). She proposes four different aspects to facilitate the application of Article 12:

> Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view.
> Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views.
> Audience: The view must be listened to.
> Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate (Lundy, 2007, p. 933).

Pupil voice in the role of an assessor might be an exercise in facilitating the four criteria stipulated by Article 12, described above.

'Pupils as Assessors' Might Bring About School Improvement. Pupils' assessment of schools is not an end in itself. It is the means that could facilitate school improvement (Chappell, 2021; Mitra, 2018). Rudduck et al. (2003, p. 275) argue: "taking our agenda for change from students as the key stakeholders can be a powerful way forward". This chimes very closely with the researcher's opinion that the ultimate purpose of choosing pupils as assessors is to be able to offer recommendations for better-quality schools, and possibly, for improvements to the whole educational system in Malta.

Methodology

The Research Strategy

A mixed methods research approach was used in this study. The following research tools were used: focus groups, questionnaires, group interviews and one-to-one interviews. The sampling frame was determined by the following factors:

- A large sample to record a wide spectrum of pupil voice
- A cross-section of state schools in Malta
- Representation from each of the 10 colleges

Taking into consideration the above three factors, cluster sampling was chosen as the optimum sampling frame for this study. In this study, the clusters were already in existence since state primary and secondary schools in Malta are grouped under ten colleges.

Because this article focuses on the quantitative component of the research, only the quantitative data analysis strategy will be presented.

The Research Tools and the Sampling Frame

The following table (Table 1) offers an overview of how the research tools were used in the study:

Table 1

Overview of the research tools

Research Tool	Target Population	Number of Participants	Objective
Focus groups	Year 4, Year 6, Form 2, Form 4 and sixth-form pupils	86	To gather feedback to inform the design of the questionnaire
Pilot questionnaire	Year 4 and Form 4 pupils	71	To pilot the questionnaire as a research tool
Questionnaire	Year 4 and Form 4 pupils	1618	To find out the quality indicators of a good school from the pupils' perspective
Pilot interviews	Heads of Schools	3	To pilot the interview as a research tool
Group interviews	Year 4 and Form 4 pupils	47	To gather feedback on the different stakeholders' viewpoints on pupils' role as assessors To critically analyse the pupil-generated list of the quality indicators of a good school
One-to-one interviews	Primary and Secondary Heads of Schools	5	
	Policymakers at ministerial and directorate levels	5	

The Questionnaire

A total of 1618 pupils participated in the questionnaire. Pupils were asked to gauge 32 different quality indicators of a good school. The data was collected from 31 different schools: 20 primary schools and 11 secondary schools. More primary schools than secondary schools had to be included in the study, since most of the primary schools had a small pupil population. The overall response rate was 70.2%; 62.8% for primary school pupils (Year 4) and 75.3% for secondary school pupils (Form 4). According to Lindemann (2021), the average response rate for a questionnaire survey is 33%. The relatively high response rate of this study could be due to the theme being investigated, which appeals directly to pupils; the pupils could have seen the questionnaire as an opportunity to voice their opinion on what matters to them. In addition, since the theme of the questionnaire was neither a particularly sensitive nor a controversial one, it might have made it easier to gain parents'/carers' consent.

Integration

The choice of different research methods and types of data set alone do not qualify a research design as mixed methods research (Feilzer, 2010). One of the features that distinguish mixed methods research from other approaches is the way the data is integrated, in fact, this concept is crucial in mixed methods research (Bazeley, 2012; Fetters et al., 2013; Fielding, 2012). In this study, integration occurred at all three levels described by Fetters et al. (2013): the study design level, the methods level, and the interpretation and reporting level. The following integrative mixed methods strategies (Bazeley, 2012) were implemented in this research:

1. Integrating results from analyses of separate data components: data from the focus group activities was integrated with the data from literature to design the questionnaire. In addition, the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended question in the questionnaire was used to supplement the quantitative data obtained.
2. Integrating the data which informs another set of data: data collected from the focus group activity sessions was used to design the questionnaire.
3. Integrating more than one strategy for analysis: data analysed in one form was converted into another form. This may take the form of

"qualitising" numeric data or "quantitising" qualitative data (Bazeley, 2012, p. 816). In this research, the qualitative data from the open-ended question in the questionnaire was analysed quantitatively. In addition, the codes and themes that emerged from the coding process on the interview data were analysed quantitatively.

Quantitative Data Analysis Strategy

The quantitative data was analysed through simple statistics and factor analysis, the results of which are tabulated below (Table 2).

Table 2

Quality indicator under each factor

Factor 1 Learning and School Climate	Factor 2 Achieving	Factor 3 Doing
A clean school	Parents participating in school	Activities at school
A good Head of School	Having regular tests and examinations	School outings
Discipline at school	High expectations for pupils	Lots of sports activities
Cooperation between teachers and pupils	Allowing pupils to use mobile phones at school	Modern resources
Good teachers	Pupils obtaining high grades in examinations and tests	Having animals in school
A green school	Casual wear for pupils instead of uniforms	
A safe environment	More time for lessons	
Good behaviour from pupils		
Pupils respect teachers		
Good Assistant Heads of Schools		
More learning opportunities		
Respect between pupils		
Better-quality books		
A pleasant atmosphere at school		

Simple Statistics on the Questionnaire Data. The data was analysed using SPSS and different forms of descriptive analysis were conducted to collate the results of the questionnaire and to interpret the numerical data obtained. In addition, factor analysis needed to be carried out on the numerical data obtained from the questionnaire responses, so that the relationship between different variables and pupils' judgement of what constitutes a good school could be understood.

Factor Analysis. Factor analysis was used to determine whether the pupils' age, gender, socio-economic background, and academic attainment levels were influencing the pupils' responses. The first step was to determine whether factor analysis could be carried out on the data. Next, the number of factors that could be extracted was determined. A factor is a set of quality indicators having a similar response pattern. After the factors were extracted, the reliability of the factors obtained was tested. Three factors were extracted and a label for each factor was derived inductively from the list of the quality indicators making up each factor: Learning and school climate, Achieving, and Doing.

Once the factors were extracted, reliability analysis was conducted to measure the reliability of the factors. Reliability analysis was carried out on the polychoric correlations for each factor using Cronbach's alpha, split-half reliability, and Guttman reliability values. In all cases, the values obtained were all above 0.7. This means that the three factors that were extracted were all reliable.

To determine if the three factors were influenced by pupils' age, gender, socio-economic background, and academic attainment levels, factor scores were obtained through a regression approach. A factor score is a numerical value to show the relative standing of a response on a factor. These factor scores were then tested to check if they are affected by the variables investigated in the study. The variables: age, gender, socio-economic backgrounds, are categorical or ordinal data, and so for these variables, the responses were first tested for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test. In cases of non-normal distribution, the Mann-Whitney test was then carried out to find out if the factor scores were influenced by the variable; whereas in cases of normal distribution, independent sample t-testing was carried out. The relationship between the fourth variable, academic attainment level, and the factor scores had to be tested using a different technique, since academic attainment level was a

continuous variable in this study. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was used to test how the factor score variable was affected by the academic attainment variable.

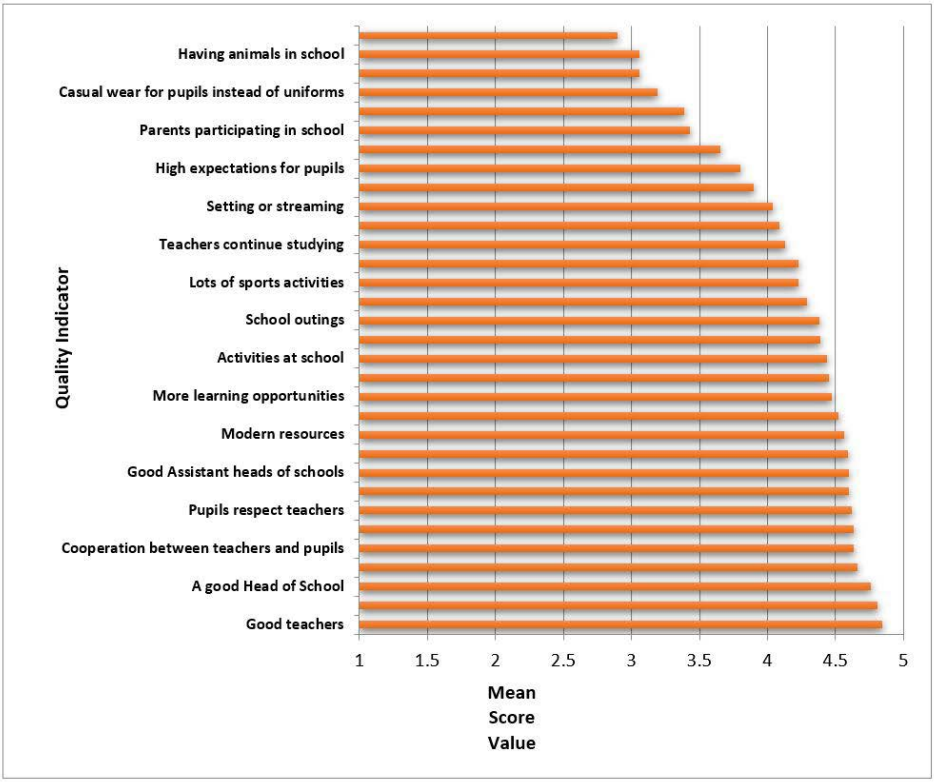
The Findings and Their Significance

The Pupil-Generated List of the Quality Indicators of a 'Good School'

The list was derived from the questionnaire conducted with a total of 1618 Year 4 and Form 4 pupils. Pupils were asked to rate the level of importance of 32 quality indicators. The following bar chart (Figure 1) shows how pupils ranked the quality indicators of a good school. The rating scale ranged from a minimum of 1 (lowest importance) to a maximum of 5 (highest importance).

Figure 1

Pupil-generated list for the quality indicators of a good school



To be able to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the data on the 32 quality indicators listed in the questionnaire, the quality indicators were grouped under ten categories, as depicted in Table 3.

To be able to compare how segregated pupil populations rated the different categories of quality indicators, the mean value for each category

was calculated. This was first carried out on the total pupil population (overall result). Then the mean value for each category was calculated for segregated groups within the sample. Table 4 shows the mean values for the overall result for each category in descending order, and the mean values for each category in the segregated groups:

Age – grouped into primary and secondary school pupils
Gender – grouped into boys and girls
Socio-economic background – grouped into 5 sub-groups[i]
Academic attainment level – grouped into 5 sub-groups[ii]

Table 3

Quality indicators under each category

School Leadership
A good Head of School
Good Assistant Heads of Schools
Physical Resources
A clean school
A safe environment
A school hall
School lockers
School Climate
Cooperation between teachers and pupils
Parents participating in school
A green school
Setting or streaming

Good behaviour from pupils
A pleasant atmosphere at school
Pupils respecting teachers
High expectations for pupils
Respect between pupils
School Activities
Activities at school
School outings
Lots of sports activities
Teachers and the Quality of Learning
More learning opportunities
Good teachers
Teachers continue studying
More time for lessons
Resources for Learning
Better-quality books
Modern resources
Discipline
Discipline at school
Assessment
Having regular tests and examinations
Pupils obtain high grades in examinations and tests
Perks
Allowing pupils to use mobiles at school
Casual wear for pupils instead of uniforms
Having animals in school
School Organisation
Boys and girls in the same class
Secondary schools divided into middle schools and senior schools

Table 4

Categories and overall mean values for segregated pupil populations

Category	Overall Mean Value	Age		Gender		Socio–Economic Background					Academic Attainment Level				
		Prim	Sec	Boys	Girls	0	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5
School Leadership	4.68	4.82	4.60	4.62	4.73	4.50	4.85	4.67	4.74	4.69	4.13	4.48	4.55	4.57	4.71
Discipline	4.52	4.70	4.42	4.47	4.57	4.42	4.67	4.54	4.55	4.45	3.91	4.33	4.38	4.39	4.53
Resources for learning	4.48	4.52	4.45	4.42	4.52	4.48	4.44	4.47	4.52	4.45	3.97	4.39	4.45	4.51	4.50
Physical Resources	4.45	4.44	4.44	4.32	4.55	4.42	4.49	4.46	4.45	4.38	4.18	4.37	4.45	4.42	4.50
School Activities	4.35	4.43	4.31	4.44	4.28	4.43	4.27	4.36	4.35	4.29	4.59	4.37	4.34	4.26	4.25
School Climate	4.31	4.54	4.18	4.28	4.34	4.26	4.38	4.30	4.36	4.27	3.89	4.12	4.12	4.14	4.27
Assessment	4.10	4.55	3.84	4.12	4.09	4.12	4.32	4.09	4.16	4.05	3.50	3.87	3.80	3.84	3.90
Teachers/ Quality of learning	4.09	4.37	3.92	4.06	4.11	3.95	4.23	4.08	4.11	4.09	3.55	3.84	3.19	3.89	3.99
Perks	3.21	2.68	3.52	3.27	3.17	2.99	3.13	3.23	3.21	3.17	3.65	3.80	3.68	3.54	3.32
School Organisation	3.36	3.51	3.27	3.60	3.16	3.22	3.25	3.36	3.37	3.37	3.72	3.55	3.29	3.29	3.13

The Salient Outcomes

The main findings of the study can be summarised as follows:

1. Through the pupil-generated list of the quality indicators of a good school, pupils have expressed their preference for a ProSocial School; this term was originally coined by Jennings & Greenberg (2009).
2. Pupils have judged 'Good teachers' to be the most important indicator of a good school, followed by 'A Clean school' and 'A good Head of School'.
3. Physical resources are less important than human resources for pupils.

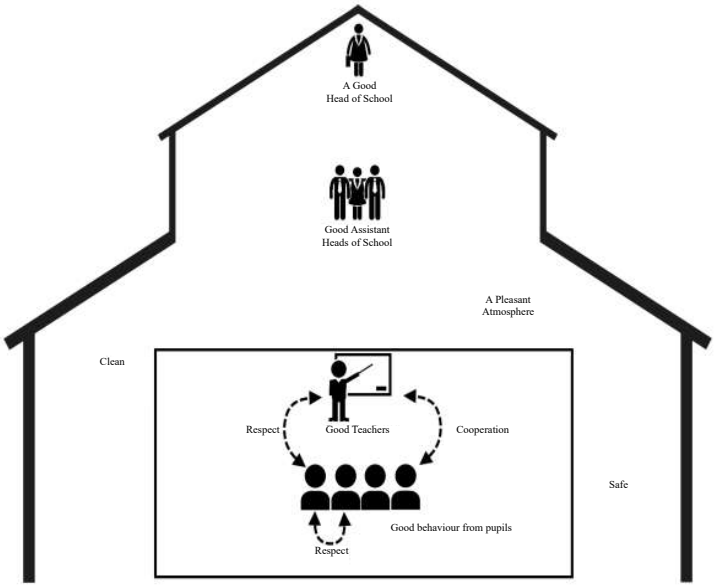
4. The pupil variables: age, gender, socio-economic background, and academic attainment level, influenced pupils' judgement of schools.
5. There was unanimous agreement amongst pupils, Heads of Schools, and policymakers on the concept of pupil voice in the role of assessor, both on a theoretical level and on the practical application of it in this study.

The Importance of a Prosocial School for the Maltese Pupil

The pupil-generated list of the quality indicators of a good school emphasises the importance of human resources and of interpersonal relationships in a school. As is evident in Figure 2, which graphically represents the top ten quality indicators of a good school through the eyes of the Maltese pupil, the social imperative in the learning process (Neville, 2013) appears to be pivotal to the Maltese pupil.

Figure 2

Top ten quality indicators of a good school according to pupils



For Maltese pupils, the quality indicator which is most important for a good school is 'Good teachers'. It seems that pupils have identified what, according to Hattie (2003), is the single most important influence which can make a positive difference in schools:

> We have poured more money into school buildings, school structures, we hear so much about reduced class sizes and new examinations and curricula, we ask parents to help manage schools ... (it) is like searching for your wallet, which you lost in the bushes, under the lamppost because that is where there is light. The answer lies elsewhere – it lies in the person who gently closes the classroom door and performs the teaching act – the person who puts into place the end effects of so many policies, who interprets these policies, and who is alone with students during their 15,000 hours of schooling. (Hattie, 2003, pp. 2–3)

Similarly, Day et al. assert: "No school has improved without the commitment of teachers; and although some students learn despite their teachers, most learn because of them ... So the rhetoric is clear. Teachers matter" (Day et al., 2007, p. 1). The pupils in this study have shown that they know that "teachers matter".

Pupil Voice in the Eyes of the Other Stakeholders in the Study

Heads of Schools and policymakers referred to the concept of the pupil as a 'customer' or a 'client' as a justification for pupil voice as assessor. This might be a way of perceiving how the obligations imposed by quality assurance can be fulfilled. Fielding (2001b, p. 107) describes such a perception of pupil voice as a "conformist" voice that depicts pupils as the receivers of products such as skills and examination results; and the teachers as "pedagogic technicians". On the other hand, all sets of stakeholders referred to pupil voice as a way of empowering pupils. This type of pupil voice forms part of "prerogative practice", which has the ability "not only to inspire, but to sustain developments" (Fielding, 2001b, p. 107). These two facets of pupil voice also echo with what Czerniawski (2012, p. 131) describes as the "two competing narratives" on pupil voice: the transformative and democratic potential in pupil voice, and the potential to be a tool for auditing and increasing organisational efficiency.

Power and Pupil Voice

The very concept of pupil voice as assessor incites questions about the distribution of power in the school, an institution which, arguably, is "a 'container', generating disciplinary power" (Giddens, 1984, p. 135). The concept redefines the power relation between the pupil and the adult; however, this is to be expected because pupil voice work challenges the "structures and processes of power" (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p. 12). The pupil-generated list of the quality indicators of a good school is the result of the pupil assessing, mainly, what adults have done or have facilitated in schools. The traditional power relation has been inverted so that it is now the adult who is the assessee and the pupil who is the assessor. In fact, one of the concerns of Heads of Schools and policymakers was that adults in a school might be afraid of pupil voice as an assessor, because they might feel threatened. This fear of losing or reducing the adult's power is a common concern (Bragg, 2007; Cassar, 2011; Flutter, 2007); however, one of the policymakers argued that schools need not be afraid that the traditional power balances in schools are changing, since these are also changing in society. The study showed that there was a wide range in the amount of power which Heads of School were ready to give to pupil voice: from limited power to involving pupils in the highest ranks of decision-making in a school. Policymakers referred to the lack of presence, and hence, of power in pupil voice, when reforms are introduced. They argued that adults do not know what pupils are feeling and thinking; nevertheless, decisions are taken in the name of pupils (Fielding, 2004). One of the policymakers mentioned how adults act as gatekeepers of pupil voice in schools, and how they tend to take an overbearing role (Nelson, 2015; Thompson, 2009).

Variables Influencing Pupils' Assessment of Schools

Further insights from this study were that pupils' assessment of a good school was influenced by age, gender, socio-economic background, and academic attainment level. The more salient outcomes are described below.

Younger pupils tended to give higher scores to indicators of quality. According to Lapsley (1990), children and preadolescents believe that an objective knowledge exists, and that given unbiased information, people will reach the same conclusion; however, adolescents "subjectivize reality" (Lapsley, 1990, p. 186) and they start becoming more sceptical. This change in thought processes

might account for the relatively higher scores given by Year 4 pupils to most of the quality indicators.

The findings showed that girls gave higher scores for the 'School Climate' category. This confirms a study by Orr (2011) that found that girls are more likely than boys to have positive attitudes about school; it also supports a study on Maltese pupils (Grima, 2010) that claimed that girls are more involved in school than boys. On the other hand, boys scored higher for the 'Doing' factor, which includes the quality indicator 'Lots of sports activities'. The boys' assessment might partially be the result of the influence of ideas set by society which associate masculinity with doing well in sports (Anselmi, 1998). This outcome confirmed traditional gender stereotypes, and could be a wake-up call for schools to, firstly, ensure that schools themselves do not perpetuate gender stereotypes, and secondly, to try to compensate for gender stereotype messages which pupils might be exposed to in their families or in the wider Maltese society.

The socio-economic background that gave results that varied the most from the rest of the socio-economic backgrounds was the group of pupils with unemployed parents. When compared with other socio-economic groups, this group of pupils gave the highest ratings to the quality indicators 'Modern resources' and 'School activities'. This could be attributed to the lack of financial means at home. When compared with other socio-economic backgrounds, this same group of pupils also scored the lowest ratings to the categories: 'School leadership', 'Teachers and Quality of Learning' and 'School Organisation'. One possible explanation is that these pupils lack the 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1987) which makes them comfortable in a school setting; this could lead to their feeling more disengaged from the schooling process than other groups of pupils, and so they value the traditional descriptors of school life less.

This study examined the effect of academic attainment level only in secondary school pupils, since data on academic attainment levels could only be obtained from secondary schools. The results showed that there was a positive correlation between academic attainment level and the 'Learning and School Climate' factor. Ghirxi (2012) had shown that Maltese students who were

high achievers were highly motivated, had high expectations, and exhibited high perseverance in school tasks; this could explain the high rankings given to 'Learning' quality indicators. This study showed that pupils with low academic attainment level gave low ratings to the 'Learning and School Climate' factor; this confirms the findings of a study by Cachia (1997), who drew up a profile of the Maltese primary school pupil in the lowest academic stream.

The Way Forward for Pupil Voice as Assessor in Malta

Whilst Heads of Schools argued that pupils need to learn how to express their voice, policymakers also insisted that adults need to learn how to invite pupil voice and how to react to it. It seems that the way forward is for better preparation for offering pupils a meaningful voice as assessor, for both pupils and adults. Each whole-school community needs to learn more about the optimum conditions for pupil voice to flourish (Bragg, 2007; Fielding, 2001a; Devine, 2000; Gunter & Thomson, 2007; Morgan, 2011; Osberg, 2006). Pupils need the "right 'literacy'" (Schratz, 2005, p. 381) to feel comfortable to contribute; this means that schools need to move away from existing managerial discourse, find ways of communicating in a pupil-friendly manner, and "do more than merely invite student voice" but "insist upon, enquire into, try to understand, interrogate, and generate student voice as best as they can" (Angus, 2006, p. 378). Schools also need to find ways to sustain pupil voice in the role of an assessor (Flutter, 2007; Mitra, 2001; Pedder & McIntyre, 2006) since there is a danger that "the interest may burn out before its transformative potential has been fully understood" (Rudduck et al., 2003, p. 285). This study is based on the warrant, evidenced in the review of relevant published work, that "pupil voice as assessor" has been reported not only to lead to immediate benefits such as the improvement of specific issues in a school, but also can be an investment in the social capital of a school (Hargreaves, 2003). This could have wider ramifications, such as the school evolving into a learning community for all its members (Rudduck et al., 2003). Once these benefits are recognised, they could act as a stronger incentive for schools to engage more fully with giving pupils voice.

Changes at school level need to be consolidated by initiatives and direction at a national level. There was unanimous agreement amongst policymakers on the importance of taking pupil voice as assessor on board. One of the policymakers suggested an SIA – a Student Impact Assessment – for each new educational policy, and referred to the draft Education Act of 2016 (MEDE, 2016, p. 8). Introducing a Student Impact Assessment could be a powerful way forward for pupil voice as assessor in Malta; the pupil would be given the opportunity to assess new policies before they are implemented in schools and to influence changes in new policies, making them more pupil-friendly and pupil-relevant. In this way, pupil voice would be informing educational reforms. Adults would be giving pupils a voice at the highest levels of decision-making. Unfortunately, the Student Impact Assessment initiative outlined in the draft Education Act (2016) is not mentioned in Education Act (2019). Nevertheless, on a school level, this initiative could be a powerful way forward for pupil voice in the role of an assessor.

Conclusion

Pupil voice in the role of assessor challenges the status quo in schools. For pupils, it could, or rather it should, be an important lesson for life. For Breslin (2011, p. 57), giving voice to pupils is the "ultimate purpose of education", and furthermore, he argues that when pupils have been given the opportunity to express their voice, they become "engaged as problem solvers and team players who are willing to listen, reflect and learn at every opportunity, balancing assertiveness and empathy for the common good in the process" (Breslin, 2011, p. 57).

By inviting pupils to act as assessors for Maltese schools, schools in Malta can continue to improve and remain relevant to their prime raison d'être: the pupil. Although this is not likely to be a panacea for all the ills in Maltese schools, Crane (2001, p. 54) reminds us that "schools cannot learn how to become better places for learning without asking the students". Pupils themselves stand to benefit, since any improvement in schools directly affects them. The exercise in itself is an educational lesson for pupils, promoting the development of communicative, analytical and critical skills. In the fullness of time, Maltese society will stand to benefit, because pupils having a voice that can bring about positive change in schools will eventually develop into adults having a voice that can bring about positive change in Maltese society.

Notes

i. 0= unemployed parents/guardians

1= parents/carers have a primary school level of education (1st skill level)

2= parents/carers have a secondary school level of education (2nd skill level)

3= parents/carers have a post-secondary level of education, below university level (3rd skill level)

4= parents/carers have a university level of education (4th skill level).

ii. Secondary school pupils follow different 'track' programmes in the core subjects: Maltese, English and Mathematics, according to their academic ability. The total track level in the core subjects was used as a measure of academic attainment level. Pupils were grouped under five academic attainment levels: 1 to 5, with level 5 being the highest academic attainment level.

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