

Report on Sabbatical

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## **Investigation into Student Voice – Term 1 2009**

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## **Focus of Sabbatical**

Avonside Girls' High School which is an urban girls' school of 1300 students in Christchurch is part of a cluster of 9 schools in Canterbury which have EHSAS funding for a project called Raising Achievement for All (RAFA). This project arose out of a previous project in which six of the schools were involved in previous years. The goal of the current project is to raise achievement for all by engaging students in learning and the four targets are

1. to strengthen the professional learning communities in each school
2. to engage students in learning by improving teaching practice
3. to share the best knowledge and practice to engage students in learning
4. to use data effectively to plan deliberate acts of teaching and measure practice

My interest in student voice in learning came about through the focus which the professional learning groups at Avonside Girls' High School had in relation to increasing student engagement in learning by improving teaching practice. Each teacher was part of a professional learning group focusing on one of four aspects of teaching practice – differentiation, co-operative learning, questioning/higher order thinking and building positive relationships. All of these involved student-centred approaches to teaching and learning.

At the same time we were seeking to strengthen the voice of our students in school organisation through the student run School Councils. By this means we hoped to increase their sense of belonging to the school community and thus impact further on their engagement in school and learning.

The development of student voice has meant involving student in the organisational structures of the school through leadership roles, councils and membership of the Board of Trustees. However, the RAFA project gives us the opportunity to consider extending this involvement from the organisation into learning.

Because of this, I was interested in investigating how schools of similar type and size dealt with the issue of student input into school organisation and further into their own learning. For my sabbatical in Term 1 2009, I visited a number of girls' schools in the United Kingdom in Birmingham and Bradford to investigate student voice in curriculum and school organisation. In San Francisco, I attended a meeting of the San Francisco United School District Board of Education and held a meeting with the two student representatives who sit on that Board. They are also members of the Student Advisory Council to the Board.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to acknowledge the Board of Trustees of Avonside Girls' High School for their support of my application for sabbatical leave and to the Senior Management Team who lead the school so capably in my absence.

My thanks go to the Ministry of Education for funding of the sabbatical programme which is of such benefit to principals in their work.

I am very grateful to my principal colleagues in Birmingham and Bradford who welcomed me into their schools and who were so generous in sharing their experience and knowledge with me. I would also like to thank all the students who shared their observations and ideas with me. It was a delight to meet such committed and involved young people.

I am grateful too for the opportunity to attend and contribute to a Principals' Conference focused on student voice run by Birmingham Education Authority.

I would also like to acknowledge the San Francisco Unified School District SAC Advisor, Jessica Link for her assistance and the two student delegates to the Board, Nestor Reyes and Maxwell Wallace for their time and help.

## **Methodology**

As it was winter and England was experiencing record snow falls and subsequent school closure, I was unable to visit some schools as planned because they were closed.

However, I was still able to visit a number of schools and attend a seminar for school principals on student voice while in England.

The question for investigation was “How do schools address the issue of student voice in learning and school organisation?”

The specific questions for each school were

1. How do you encourage students’ participation in their own learning?
2. How do you encourage student participation and involvement in school organisation?

I visited large state single sex girls’ schools in Birmingham and Bradford and met with the Head teachers, the teachers who worked with the school council and/ or students involved in learning projects and groups of students in each school. At the end of each visit I wrote a summary including a brief description of the school and the programmes related to student voice.

In San Francisco, I did not visit schools but contacted the San Francisco Unified School District Board of Education and attended their fortnightly public meeting. I also held a meeting with the two student representatives from that Board. The purpose of this was to look at a school system which has an officially organised means of ensuring student input at policy level. The question for the students was

1. How effective, do you feel, is the student input at policy level?

The UK section of my report will concentrate on the ideas which I observed in action in schools. It will focus on the practical things that schools were doing and that they found were assisting students’ engagement with their learning and their sense of connection with their schools and which may be able to be implemented in New Zealand schools. The programmes will be described and grouped under the following headings - School Councils, Other Ways of Including Student Voice, Student Involvement in Staff Appointments, Student Voice in Teaching and Learning and Conference Report.

The San Francisco section will describe the Board meeting and the discussion with the two student representatives about their participation in the governance of the districts’ schools.

## **UK Findings**

### **School Councils**

The School Councils in the UK schools I visited deal with similar issues to New Zealand School Councils such as uniform, canteen food, running non-uniform days and fundraising for charity. In some of the schools, their impact in these areas was quite significant. At one school in Bradford, the school council had surveyed students, held meetings with the caterers, sampled the proposed menus and introduced healthier food, larger portions and a change to staggered lunch hours for students. Teachers felt that the healthy food had improved behaviour. The Head of this school believed that this had really begun the emphasis on student voice in the school.

The School Councils had had a strong role in developing Consequence Systems in two of the schools I visited. In both these schools, the systems were credited by staff as having improved low level poor behaviour. While the systems in the two schools were different, they both involved warnings, detention or referral from class for poor behaviour and gaining individual points for good behaviour and work, then receiving certificates or rewards when specific numbers of points had been gained.

In some schools, the School Council had also developed a role related to learning. For example, in one school, the School Council has begun discussion about what makes a good lesson and how lessons can be improved and has invited some staff to give their views to the Council and to be interviewed by them.

### **Other Ways of Including Student Voice**

The Head of one school commented that the School Council give opportunities to a relatively small group of students and tended to attract the more academic students so other ways of involving students in school organisation were being explored. There were a range of these across schools

- A suggestion box in which individuals or groups of students can put in a suggestion about an issue. It must have names on it and must explain what they can do about it. The principal responds to each suggestion. Two Year 9 students, Sonya and Alisha, had put in a proposal to redesign the Year 9 and 10 toilet block. They wanted to eliminate the problems of graffiti, bullying and students hiding there. They then talked to the caretaker and staff, drew up a plan, spoke in assembly about the problems and took a vote on their plan. They got quotes and presented the plan and quotes to the Board of Governors who voted £24,000 for the project which has been completed according to their specifications.

- Charity and community work projects were not the province of the school council but again were worked on by any individuals or small groups who were interested in the particular project.
- One school had developed 4 Learning groups which were open to parents, students and staff – anyone who wished to join. They meet at lunchtimes and after-school
  1. Building Learning with a focus on developing property for learning
  2. Future Learning – developing ICT and a Learning Zone project
  3. Green Learning – focusing on environmental issues and learning
  4. Health Learning – focusing on health issues
- Student Responsibilities. One school had 4 areas of school life that students could apply to work in
  - Microtecs – helped students and staff with ICT
  - Infotecs – helped in the library
  - Mediators – worked with students as peer mediators
  - Expressive Arts Reps – student with interest in PE, Drama, Music or Art help staff with practices, rehearsals, gear etc

Students have to apply for these positions in writing and are selected by staff. There are limited numbers in each area. Those selected are given a badge and a different colour tie to identify them and ongoing training.
- SWOT analysis
 

Each tutor group (form group) which is a mixed ability group of 30 students meets for registration twice a day. These groups have two hours per week of Personal Guidance which includes study and planning skills, health education, citizenship and discussion of social and moral issues. Each tutor group completes a swot analysis and the information is used to inform school decision making.
- Youth Parliament
 

There is a Birmingham Youth Parliament which has 7 elected members who represent the young people of the city. The MYPs Identify 7 key issues for young people in Birmingham and then work on them through specific campaigns targeted at those issues. They have focused on issues such as effective Sexual Health Education for young people in Birmingham and respect for others.

## **Student Involvement in Staff Appointments**

In some schools students have a very strong voice in staff appointments. Two ways of ensuring this stood out for me.

1. Shortlisted applicants are asked to lead a discussion with a group of 5 or 6 students about how to raise achievement in the school. The students are volunteers who are briefed and told that the applicants are guests who must be looked after. The students have questions prepared before hand. A senior staff member observes. This is often the HOD of the relevant learning area and is a good way for them to gather students' views about their learning area. This process has been evaluated with candidates who commented that although they were nervous, they had found it a positive experience and learned from it.
2. The staff Governor chose two students to show all candidates shortlisted for interview around the school. They are usually the Head and Deputy of a Year Council. The candidates are told that the students will be reporting back to the appointment panel. Only once in six years has the appointment not coincided with the students' choice.

## **Student Voice in Teaching and Learning**

Some schools have taken student voice further than contributing to school organisation and are working with students on student voice in learning. There were a number of different approaches to this.

- Work sampling – a teacher sat with a small group of students for a discussion and feedback about assessment, teaching and learning styles.
- Subject Representatives – The Head of each learning area chose a representative, usually a senior student, whom other students can speak to about. The subject representative would bring any concerns, problems or issues around the learning area to the HOD or teachers on behalf of the other students.
- Innovations Committee  
This was group of 10 teachers from a range of learning areas and 10 student volunteers from Year 9 and 10. At first it was teacher led and the meetings were about trust building, establishing agreed ways of working and confidentiality. Now they are doing action research in small groups - two teachers and two students. The groups have identified a topic, methods of investigation which include surveys, lesson observation, logs and student interviews and how they will feedback to the group. The topics are questioning, active learning, and the classroom learning environment, science specialism, ICT, revision and risk-taking. Two examples are outlined below.

1. Learning Environment. There had been an on-line survey about the impact of the classroom environment on learning. The results had been very positive but there were some questions which were ambiguous and so the plan was to interview 5 students per year group on the question “Could the students easily talk to the teachers?” This question had to be clarified as it was supposed to ask could the teacher get around the classroom and speak to students easily. It had been interpreted to be about whether students felt the teachers were approachable.

## 2. ICT and impact of technology

The group have given a log to a number of students and staff to chart how technologies such as laptops, the Virtual Learning Environment and Smartboards are used in the classroom and in what subjects are they used. Why some students will not use the VLE although they will use email and why younger students use VLE forums more than senior students.

A meeting of the staff and students in this group which was held in the lunch hour indicated clearly that these students were very involved in the research and were confident about providing feedback to students at assemblies and to staff at staff meetings.

- Student interviews

Each faculty nominated a student who had made significant progress. These students sit at a table and teachers can come and interview them – asking questions about what had helped them to make such good progress.

- Student Show case

The A level (Final Year) teachers choose two students from each department and hold a voluntary seminar for teachers to discuss teaching and learning with these students.

- Student Attitude Survey

This survey is paid for by the school and administered and analysed by the provider and examines students’ attitude to school and learning. Students who have low scores are picked up in a mentoring programme.

- International

One school had developed links with Sri Lanka in which students were working on joint developed projects over a range of subjects including Geography – climate



comparisons, Physical Education – sports which are unique to each country and those which they have in common and Art – reflecting culture through art.

- In only one school that I visited was it noted that students attended meetings of the Board of Governors and in that case it was two 6<sup>th</sup> Form students who had volunteered to do so in order to keep the Board updated on school activities.

## **Conference Report**

The focus of this seminar day which formed part of a conference for new principals was pupil voice and leadership in schools. There were presentations from three schools.

### **Fox Hollies School**

This is a school for students with severe learning difficulties which has developed a partnership with the Birmingham Royal Ballet for its students involved in dance. They have established the FreeFall Dance Company of 9 dancers who benefit from the opportunities for choreography and creativity in addition to running courses for schools, disability workshops and performing. It is a long term partnership which is not project based but is placed in the centre of the curriculum. Two of the members of the FreeFall Company ran a short dance workshop for the conference participants.

### **Billesley Primary School**

Three students from Year 6 presented their experiences as student leaders in their primary school.

Student Banking – The students at this school run the students banking. They have roles as Bank Manager, Cashier, Messenger and Asst Manager. There is liaison with the HBSC but the organisation in the school is run by the students.

Peer Mediation – 20 students are trained and act as mediators in playground and classroom conflicts.

School Clubs – students are encouraged to run their own clubs. The speaker was a girl who runs a recorder club once a week to teach others how to play the recorder.

### **Colmers School**

This secondary school is working towards integration of student leadership into the curriculum at every level by acknowledging leadership in all areas of school life – sports, community, and arts. They have introduced a Booklet for Leaders across all curriculum areas in the school. They have Learning for Life lessons in which life goals are analysed and there is specific leadership discussion.

The two student leaders who made the presentation had attended a national Young Leaders weekend on the theme of International Leadership and had participated in a Cabinet meeting held in Birmingham chaired by the Prime Minister and involving local students, business and community leaders.

## San Francisco Findings

In San Francisco, I attended the 10 March meeting of the San Francisco Unified School District Board. This elected group of 7 commissioners govern all the state schools in San Francisco which includes 18 High Schools. The Board meets every second Tuesday at 6pm. The meetings last between 2 and 6 hours. The meetings are webcast and those are archived on the SFUSD website. The meetings were very well attended by parents, members of the community especially those who have a complaint or protest to make. In addition to the 7 elected members, there are two student representatives. They are part of the Student Advisory Council which has 2 representatives from each of the High Schools on it. There were 7 elected representatives and two student representatives but no teacher representatives as of right. It may be that some of the elected representatives were teachers but they were elected to represent the community not the interests of teachers. ON the other hand, the amount of time at the meeting given over to recognition of teachers, librarians and principals was significant. On the San Francisco Unified School District website, there is encouragement for parents, students and community members to show their appreciation for teachers through the Thank A Teacher Today scheme. The following is an extract from the website.

Teachers make a lifetime of difference. It's important to recognize them for the work they do.

All year long - and especially each May - parents, students, and SFUSD staff are encouraged to personally thank teachers for their dedication and hard work on behalf of San Francisco's young people.

It's easy. Send a personal note to a teacher at his or her school. Start by finding the [school address](#). You can also visit [thankateachertoday.org](http://thankateachertoday.org) for a simple way to send an email postcard.

The two student representatives spoke about their concerns and their opinions were clearly valued by the Board. Their issues were

- School lunches – quality and quantity of food.

- Student feedback on teachers – they want every class in every school to do a survey of every teacher.
- Lesbian and Gay students right to experience education without prejudice or discrimination.
- Ensuring that all schools provide students with the opportunity to meet the subject requirements for California Colleges.
- There was strong concern about the policy of last on/first off when laying off teachers in the Californian school system. The Student Advisory Council had discussed this issue and was seeking legal advice about as they did not support the policy.

However, three of the five candidates for election to the position of Student Representative on the Board of Education spoke to the meeting. They all expressed concern that the student government in schools was very much focused on fundraising and that students, in general, did not participate in the democratic processes. They indicated that students don't feel that their voices are heard in schools. These views were echoed by the two Student Representatives in the meeting held with them.

#### Youth Commission

In San Francisco there is a Youth Commission which is appointed by the City Commissioners. The Youth Commission runs a Youth Vote system to elect the Student representative to the school board and also conducts a student survey in each school each year. The survey covers topics such as student to teacher feedback, class participation, violence in schools, employment and extra- curricular activities. It is aimed at guiding policy reforms related to young people and to bring youth voice to City Hall.

## Conclusions and Summary

1. The most common vehicle for student voice in the English schools I visited was the School Council. In general they appeared to run in similar ways to those in New Zealand schools with elected representatives from year levels and a teacher facilitator. However, there is greater support for them. The government strongly encourages school councils in schools and there is a national organisation, School Councils UK, which runs training, a network for schools and a website. School Council members in some schools had a full day training from School Councils UK. There is also a guidance document for Birmingham schools from the City Council on "Developing an Effective School Council"

2. It seems that most school councils are still focused on their traditional areas of fundraising, changes to school uniform and the quality of food available to students. These issues were noted by students in the schools in England and by the Student Advisory Council in San Francisco.
3. There were, in the schools I visited, many examples where students of all ages and levels of ability had made significant differences in their school communities when they had been given the opportunity to exercise their skills, creativity and ideas. The most successful of these seemed to be where all or any students in the school were encouraged to put forward their ideas in an informal structure rather than through the more formal school councils.
4. Two of the schools that I visited had extended recognition of student voice into the area of curriculum. The Innovations and Action Research Committee operating in one school was outstanding in this respect. This was a group of nine teachers and ten students working effectively together on a range of teaching and learning programmes including classroom practice, risk taking and virtual learning environments. The students were volunteers from Years 9 and 10. Student input was actively sought, considered and acted upon. Their aim was to improve learning for students. It had begun with trust building, establishing agreed ways of working and protocols around confidentiality. Initially the group was teacher driven and included training for the students in observing lessons, feedback, making presentations and creating questionnaires. After some time the Committee began to work in small groups of two teachers and two students. Each group focused on a specific topic with identified methods and feedback strategies. It was clear to me from my observations at the meeting of this group which I attended that this is the way to improve student engagement in their learning.
5. In San Francisco there was obviously also a strong civic and local political voice for students and young people in a very structured and organised way. The School Board was very supportive of the Student Advisory Council and its representatives both from my observation at their meeting and as reported by the two Student Representatives. Their views were listened to and the resolutions taken seriously. However, it seems in speaking to the two Student Representatives that the strengths of youth involvement in local political life in San Francisco are not yet reflected in the schools. In New Zealand the opposite is the case. Student voice is beginning to be heard more clearly in our schools but it is not part of our civic and local government in any structured way.

6. In all the schools and organisations which I visited it was inspiring to see the commitment of school leaders and teachers to working with students to achieve the best outcomes for the both educationally and socially. Above all it was a privilege to meet and talk to just a few of the young people in England and America who are working hard with such hope and conviction to improve their school and their world.

## **References**

### **Schools**

Hodge Hill Girls' School - Birmingham  
Hillcrest School for Girls - Birmingham  
Sutton Coldfield Grammar School for Girls - Birmingham  
Bordesley Green School for Girls - Birmingham  
Belle Vue School for Girls - Bradford

San Francisco Unified School District  
San Francisco Unified School District Student Advisory Council

### **Websites**

[www.schoolcouncils.org](http://www.schoolcouncils.org).

[www.soundout.org](http://www.soundout.org)

www.ssat-inet.net

[www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk)

[www.thankateachertoday.org](http://www.thankateachertoday.org)