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Organisational Competence: The Study of a School Council in Action

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Despite the growth in the numbers of school councils, there has been little analytical and conceptual research about this form of participation. A case study of a school council in a junior school was adopted in this study. Complementary theories of 'competent participation' and 'place in time and space' contributed to the central organising concept: organisational competence. While highlighting structural constraints such as the boundaried nature of the council's work, this concept promotes a focus on councillors' agency and action which included their contribution to the council's distinctive process and position within the school system. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

School councils have been in existence for several decades. They grew out of tentative local arrangements to try to promote more involvement by pupils in decisions about their schools. There are many definitions of school councils, but Baginsky and Hannam suggest: 'A school or pupil council is a body which draws together pupils/students to discuss what is happening in their school and, to a varying degree, consider their views on these matters' (1999, p. 6). Involvement by children and young people in education however, has not been facilitated by developments in policy and practice. Through the national curriculum and implementation of numeracy and literacy hours, education has become more: 'monolithic, prescriptive and centralised' (Fielding, 2000, p. 241). These features have combined with the 'quasi-market' pressures of performance league tables (Wyness, 2000, p. 97), resulting in an: 'emphasis on the products of the curriculum, rather than an emphasis on the processes in the school which could be improved to facilitate participation and democratic involvement' (Wyse, 2001, p. 215).

Such involvement has been further undermined by the lack of rights accorded to children within the education system. Davies and Kirkpatrick have highlighted the contrast between young people in Britain and their European peers:

> It was apparent that UK is out of line with the rest of Europe in the question of pupil democracy. It has no legislation on pupil

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> involvement or grievance procedures, no pupil unions, no pupil Ombudsman, and no system for consulting pupils on educational policy (2000, p. 7).

This lack of rights for children is highlighted by the way in which their parents are often seen as the consumers of the education system rather than them. Wyness (2000, p. 93) has suggested for example, that within education there has been an inverse relationship: 'between the changing fortunes of parental and pupil influence'.

School councils provide a forum through which children could disturb a structure which has failed to promote their participation. The development in adult-centred managerialist approaches to education however, suggests it is school councils which may have failed in promoting children's voices in education. Nevertheless, there has been a growing interest in school councils in recent years. In part this reflects a much broader growth in the participation of children and young people in the planning and provision of public services (Kirby and Bryson, 2002) during the last decade.

Developments within education specifically, have also promoted the profile of school councils. School councils have been seen as suitable vehicles for promoting 'citizenship' within schools, at a time when citizenship has been made a statutory part of the curriculum at secondary level. Taylor and Johnson suggest that the renewed enthusiasm for school councils arises from being seen to address all three of the factors that the Crick report outlined for the effective education for citizenship: 'social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 1998, p. 11). Such learning connects with a broader skills development agenda. Many benefits to pupils' skills and competencies have been identified from their involvement with a school council. For example, the charity School Councils UK (SCUK), specify that:

> Pupil councils provide a basis for active learning of important life skills, e.g. speaking and listening skills, teamwork, emotional literacy, problem-solving, moral reasoning skills, self-esteem, self confidence (2002).

School councillors themselves have reported the greatest learning for them as 'being responsible' and 'listening skills' (Taylor and Johnson, 2002, p. 97). The dilemma however, is that such learning is only received by the minority who have direct involvement with the school council.

School councils have also become popular politically because they connect with a behaviour management agenda. The early community development influence on school councils centred on their capacity to facilitate the management of unruly behaviour through the involvement of pupils. This was seen to promote the exercise of responsibility by pupils, thereby facilitating the creation of an environment more conducive to learning. This has been central to the position advocated by SCUK. In 1999 SCUK connected with the inclusion agenda, in publishing a study which suggested that school councils can help reduce school exclusions (Davies, 1999).

Compared with the discourses of citizenship, skills development and behaviour management, the discourse of children's rights has been less explicitly connected with school councils, until recently. Alderson, for example, states: 'School councils are a key practical and symbolic indicator of respect for children's rights' (2000, p. 124). Voluntary

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organisations such as Save the Children (Sutton, 1999) and the NSPCC have also been promoting a rights-based agenda with school councils: 'Through establishing school councils we demonstrate to all children that we recognise their right to be consulted, and to establish for them a positive role in their schools' (NSPCC, 2002, p. 1).

To maximise the effectiveness of children's participation, McNeish suggests that there needs to be a 'clarity of purpose' regarding participation:

> organisations and individuals need to be clear about why they are seeking participation, what they want to achieve and what level of participation is appropriate' (1999, p. 199).

Such clarity regarding children's participation through school councils has been missing however, not just because various discourses have been drawn on as above, but because they have not always been articulated explicitly.

School councils: operational issues

A number of surveys have been undertaken on a national basis to try to determine the exact scale of operation of school councils. These results have been undermined by very poor response rates, usually of under 50 per cent, such that caution has to be exercised regarding claims to generalisability. Nevertheless, a consistent finding has been that there is a higher proportion of school councils at secondary than primary level. Baginsky and Hannam (1999) found that four in five secondary schools had a council for example, while only one in five schools at primary level did. A possible explanatory factor for the greater number at secondary level is adults' perceptions of age and maturity.

Such large-scale operation has not been underpinned by Government policy however. A number of committees and inquiries have promoted the establishment of school councils, such as the 'Crick report' (QCA, 1998). Despite a strong belief in the value of active participation by pupils, Crick did not recommend that school councils be made a requirement under Government policy. He subsequently explained the reasoning for this: 'We were acutely aware of the dangers of appearing to overload the bending backs of so many teachers' (Crick, 2000, p. 81).

In addition to the surveys, a small number of qualitative studies have helped to illuminate 'local practice'. Combining these insights with the survey material, a number of features of the operation of school councils can be highlighted, as follows:

- First, that school councils often have very narrow agendas which preclude the discussion of particular topics, such as teacher behaviour and the curriculum (Ashworth, 1995; Baginsky and Hannam, 1999). While there can be a strong consensus about this, the boundaries often appear not to have been set explicitly (Campbell, 1998; Taylor and Johnson, 2002). Nevertheless, in a small minority of schools at primary level, the school council has focused on curriculum matters and even been involved in the appointment of teachers (SCUK, 2002);
- Second, that school councils are not always firmly tied in to other school structures. In particular, feedback from the school council to other pupils can be poor, such that in some schools most pupils remained unaware of school council business (Khaleel, 1993).

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At its extreme, some school councils can be seen as a 'clique' (Taylor and Johnson, 2002, p. 74) by their peers;
- Third, that feedback problems are symptomatic of a bigger problem for school councils regarding time and timing. Baginsky and Hannam (1999) found that under half held their meetings in 'curriculum time' while over half were in lunchtime or pre-/post-school. In their survey, Taylor and Johnson (2002) found that this was identified by staff in primary schools as the 'biggest problem' and concluded that there was 'no consensus' over such a 'critical issue';
- Fourth, that support from adults needs to be right. Ashworth refers to the 'delicate role' required between support: 'in focusing School Councils energy on realistic projects' while: 'On the other hand the adults in the school must not prescribe School Council business unnecessarily' (1995, p. 23);
- Fifth, that councillors can experience their roles as 'ambiguous' (Davies, 1999, p. 13). Councillors can experience school council meetings as 'fun' and distinctive from time in class. On the other hand they can also feel 'torn loyalties' between a commitment to their friends when this clashed with a responsibility to 'the norms of the school' (Taylor and Johnson, 2002, p. 75). The distinctiveness of their position is particularly marked in some schools, Campbell (1998) finding for example that one school council acted as an 'intermediary' between pupils and teachers.

Most of the research on school councils has been descriptive, focusing on operational matters (Taylor and Johnson, 2002), hence school councils have received little analytical attention. Further, little research has been undertaken into councillors' experiences and perceptions. It was to address these gaps that I undertook this study.

Methodology and research site

I adopted a qualitative approach with one school council, comprising observation and interviews during the early summer of 2002.[1] I chose the primary-aged level, as less is known about school councils for this age group. I undertook the interviews using participatory tools, thereby allowing participants to shape the activities rather than just passively doing what they had been asked. This accords with developments in the sociology of childhood in which children are seen as social actors rather than as research objects.

The case study school is a small junior school (for seven to 11 year olds) in a rural area. The school council had been running for about 15 months. Each class votes for a representative every term. In addition to the eight child councillors a teacher attends the weekly meetings. These are scheduled to last for half an hour before school one morning a week and are held in the school library. The remit of the school council is to contribute to decision making about aspects of the school's functioning. The teacher draws up the agenda each week, although the designated chair (girl) and secretary (boy) are both children. The agenda is comprised partly of items raised by children through suggestion

[1]I tried to sample for a typical school council from responses to a telephone survey of all schools covering the primary age range in two neighbouring boroughs. Criteria included: age range represented; frequency of meetings; and the method of selection for councillors. The fieldwork comprised: observation of seven consecutive school council meetings; observation of a school council presentation to a school assembly; an interview with the school councillors as a group; and an interview with the teacher linked with the school council.

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boxes which are located in each class. Having discussed each letter, the school council arrange for a councillor to write a reply. The school council does not have a budget itself although it could make recommendations both for fund raising and about priorities for spending.

I adopted a grounded theory approach for analysis, which resulted in my generating theories of 'competent participation' and 'place in time and space'.

Competent participation

The children exhibited a large range of competencies during the meetings and when discharging their roles as councillors. They displayed a range of organisational and administrative competencies, including management of the suggestion boxes and a paper trail with up to over 20 letters per week. In addition, they demonstrated many communication skills, including: reading; writing; listening; presentation; and verbal. Their verbal contributions in council meetings were often in the form of suggestions, which they appeared to make freely. Some of the suggestions were agreed and became the basis for decisions, as with a number of suggestions in meeting 4 that built into a strategy for managing the fund raising book day. However, the councillors used suggestions in different ways, sometimes to 'manage' the teacher. In meeting 7 for example, a child suggested the teacher implement the decision, which was agreed. Shortly after this another child successfully challenged the teacher's proposal that the council meet twice a week at break times to process the letters:

> *Councillor: Do we need to have just one meeting a week at break time*
> *Teacher: Just one, I know exactly what you mean. Um, so what day do you think, what day is good for all of you for a meeting?*
>
> (Extract from meeting 7)

On a number of occasions councillors continued a discussion after the teacher had appeared to close the issue. For example, they made several suggestions during meeting 4 about how to manage the letters, but after the teacher had tried hard to move onto the next agenda item. Similarly in meeting 1, a decision was reached that the chair would speak to the head teacher about having the school hall painted. Twice the teacher tried to move the meeting on to the next item, but on both occasions a councillor brought it back. Whatever the intention of the councillors in such instances, the effect was to subvert the adult control the teacher was trying to exercise over the process.

Knowledge-as-competence was displayed by councillors in two ways. First, they demonstrated some knowledge of, and empathy with, other children's experience. Examples include their discussion of how children can get hurt in rugby bulldog games and this speculation regarding a child's request for earlier lunchtimes:

> *Councillor: Maybe she's really really hungry and she just wants her food*
>
> (Extract from meeting 5)

Second, they demonstrated some capacity for decision making within a knowledge of the constraints from the school as a broader system. The clearest example concerns the

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Table 1: Responses to evaluation wheel

School council		Teacher	
Spoke	Score	Spoke	Score
Staying safe	1–2	Children safety	3
Learning	3	Children learning	1
Communicate with other children	3	Know what children want	3
New equipment	2	Raising money	1
Happy place	3	Children happiness	3
Stop bullying	3	Being responsible	3
Help people	2	Being connected with teacher/head teacher	3
More information	2		

council's plans for fund raising. This seemed to generate a heightened awareness for councillors of costs, which they displayed on several occasions. A one-word reference to 'money' became a quick shorthand for responding to other children's requests when costs would be incurred. The source of these two knowledge types differed: between knowledge already known from their position among peers; and knowledge acquired through their position on the school council.

The teacher and head teacher both confirmed prior to my first observation that they perceived the council to be working effectively. I was interested to explore whether there was any difference between adult and child perceptions of effectiveness. To address this I conducted an 'evaluation wheel' exercise with the councillors as a group and with the teacher as part of their interviews. The 'spokes' of the wheels were composed of their responses to earlier questions about the functions of the school council. I divided each spoke into three as follows and these provide the key for the scores in Table 1:

1 Poor effectiveness
2 Medium effectiveness
3 High effectiveness

Overall, both the teacher and councillors saw the council as effective. When judging effectiveness councillors considered the following factors: the degree of impact they were making; their relative contribution alongside others; and how they were addressing the issue. Of the different spokes, councillors were most animated about 'communicate with other children':

Councillor: Well
Councillor: No, very well
Councillor: Very well, yes
Me: Very well, so right on the outside then (pointing to the evaluation wheel), so everyone thinks very well?
Councillor: Yes

They adopted a broad view of 'Learning', to include the provision of information to children as well as facilitating their more structured learning through the provision of equipment:

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Councillor: we get them books and computers
Councillor: Yeah
Councillor: Near the end, near the end, near the end (pointing to spoke on wheel)
Councillor: It's there
Me: You raise money?
Councillor: We're the ones organising the stuff right, we done the readathon, so we are actually helping them

(Extract from interview with school council)

The teacher's responses were a little more polarised than the children's. While there was much agreement between them there were also some differences. The teacher rated 'children safety' highly for example, because she felt the council had a very good awareness of safety issues. By contrast, the councillors rated themselves lower, although they scored highly for stopping bullying. The teacher also rated the council as 'poor effectiveness' for 'raising money'. While acknowledging their money raising efforts, she felt that their contribution to the fund to buy new computers was tiny compared with the amount required. These differences of perspective suggest that the teacher was guided by the scale of the impact when judging effectiveness, whereas the councillors were also informed by the very fact of their contribution which in turn created a heightened sense of their own agency.

Following from their perceptions of the council having a high degree of impact and effectiveness, councillors appeared to experience a high level of agency. This is confirmed by their responses when asked what the school council did, shown in Table 2. While the teacher focused almost exclusively on how the council works, the councillors also highlighted the impact they believe they make, suggesting that councillors believe they can make a real difference at school:

Councillor: To build up the school
Me: So to build up the school, yeah? And in what sort of way?
Councillor: Um, getting equipment

Table 2: Responses to question: what does the school council do?

School council:
Tell other children our ideas and what's happening
Communication
Best school in area
Help make school a better place
Stop bullying
School more enjoyable
Safer school
Better for visitors e.g. clean and tidy
Listen to other children
Help children feel comfortable in learning
Build up school; new equipment
School a happy place
Teacher:
Knows what children want/need; aims to know
Raise money
In contact with teachers and head teacher
Be responsible (other children approach them)

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Me: Right, yeah, so new equipment
Councillor: Help make the school a happy place
Me: School a happy place
Councillor: Make the environment clean and tidy

Were the councillors' perceptions of their agency shared within the school? Other children appeared to think so given the nature of the letters written to the council. Many letters conveyed a request for action and children also expected them to be accountable. For example, some letter-writers made explicit demands of the council regarding their perceived right to a reply:

Councillor (reading letter): Dear school council, I told you about my idea for the sponsored read but got no reply. Also, when it's raining no one can sit on the benches. Please can you do something
(Extract from notes of meeting 3)

The head teacher appeared to share a perception of the school council as having a high degree of authority, which he promoted in the assembly I observed. For example, during the discussion on painting the school hall, he stated:

I may have to put my hand in my pocket and find the money if that is what the council decided
(Extract from assembly observation notes)

He consolidated this view with praise heaped on the chair for managing herself in such a responsible manner during their meetings. Despite these very positive views of the agency of the school council, it faced many constraints, which will be explored through the second theory generated from the analysis of the data.

Place in time and space

Time as a concept featured strongly throughout the fieldwork and impacted in different ways, often experienced as a constraint. By meeting at 8.30 am the councillors and teacher had to start their school day half an hour before others. The meeting was often late starting and there were usually some late arrivals. The councillors' experience of such an early start was not always positive, nevertheless they seemed very happy to meet and undertake follow-up tasks in what they referred to as their 'own time'. The teacher felt strongly that meetings should be in 'school time' but thought this would not happen because of pressure on the school from the central Government focus on literacy and numeracy.

Time could act as a constraint to council effectiveness in a number of ways. First, time constraints for meetings meant that not all the intended agenda items were covered. Usually it was the teacher who seemed most aware of this, as she seemed to be hurrying the meetings near the end, saying on many occasions: *'Really quickly then'*. The second time constraint concerned problems in finding sufficient time elsewhere in the school day to implement decisions. This concerned everyone at school, not just councillors. For example, by week 7 a decision had been taken that 5 minutes of class time would be allocated for children to write their letters to the council. This appeared to legitimise council business but was thwarted in practice. The level of busyness of adult staff members was seen as the

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reason for this and for other time-related difficulties, such as the Chair's struggle to meet with the head teacher about council business as discussed by the chair and teacher in meeting 2:

Chair: I went to see him last week, but he wasn't free
Teacher: Um
Chair: He kept saying come back, but when I go he keeps having meetings and stuff
Teacher: He's very busy isn't he. How can we get around that then?
Chair: If I go to see him in my own time, he might be able to see me.

Linked to this, time appeared to act as a constraint in a third way, more broadly on the council's connections with other stakeholders at school. This evoked a strong response from the teacher. Her annoyance stemmed from a frustration that she felt so constrained in promoting the council with her colleagues:

Teacher: I could go down the road of every week in a staff meeting, I could ask for 10 minutes to report back on what's going on, I could do that and it would happen but our staff meetings go on until 6/7 o'clock at night anyway and is that really kind of fair?

(Extract from interview with teacher)

Constraints of time highlighted the council's work in another way: that the council was unable to influence the organisation of time at school. During meeting 4 for example, when considering a request for earlier lunchtimes, councillors referred to their previous consideration of this when they had found it was impossible, in part because of the arrangements in place for the dinner supervisors. Further, in meeting 4 the teacher predicted resistance from teachers to a child's proposal that children are allowed *'a minute or two to refresh when we finish our work early'*. This response gives a clear indication of how tightly organised children's time is in the classroom. The request was significant in being the only one during seven meetings that addressed behaviour in the classroom. This in turn reflects an agenda for the council that is boundaried: environmental issues, facilities, child behaviour and fund raising on the inside of the boundary; and time organisation, education in the classroom and teacher behaviour on the outside.

How were these boundaries created and maintained? This is a particularly intriguing question because it is the children themselves who help shape the council agenda with their letters. When I asked the teacher how it had been established that only certain issues would be considered by the council, she said that she did not know, but had just carried on running it as it had been. The implication was that as the head teacher had been involved in setting it up, that he had helped shape its role.

Regarding boundary maintenance, the teacher had an explicit role in helping the council consider the limits to their authority, as shown during meeting 1:

Teacher: And if you think about painting the hall, is it our decision? Or is it just our, um, up to us, to maybe suggest to . . .
Councillor: I would say it's up to us to suggest to [head teacher], because it's [head teacher's] school and he should be the one who decides about the hall
Teacher: It's not really his school more than us is it, but he does usually have the general final say, doesn't he

(Extract from notes of meeting 1)

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Table 3: Councillors' responses to question about similarities and differences between school council and classroom

Similarities	Differences
Learning e.g. how to communicate	All in different years
	More fun
Working as a team	Make friends
Chair like a teacher	Understand more
Teacher helps	If late, informed
	Children shout out, jabber on
	More freedom
	Get it off your chest
	Children more mad, good fun

Underlying the high level of engagement by the councillors and their competent participation, there was a high degree of adult control of the process. The teacher used a great variety of inputs, including a lot of enabling through questioning and validating of councillors' views. She used a number of strategies for managing the suggestions from councillors that she did not agree with, including: questioning; ignoring; humour; re-focusing the discussion; and putting forward her own proposal. Despite the degree of adult control, did the council meetings feel distinctive compared to other experiences at school? A 'similarities and differences' question addressed this and the responses from the councillors are presented in Table 3. Overall, the councillors highlighted more 'differences', some of which related to the themes of 'fun' and 'freedom' as in these two extracts:

Councillor: Yes, it's more fun here
Councillor: You can say what you want
Councillor: Yes, it gives you more freedom and you get more stuff out and you can get it off your chest
(Extracts from councillors' interview)

The teacher also highlighted a sense of 'difference' for the councillors, agreeing that they have more freedom to talk. Interestingly, she felt this greater sense of freedom extended to herself, not just because of the children being councillors but also because of the way in which they conducted themselves. She felt that she could trust the councillors such that she could let her 'guard down' and that they would not abuse this, although this would not apply to all children. The distinctiveness of her relationship with councillors makes her role more ambiguous:

Teacher: Yes, it's most definitely not teaching
Me: Yes
Teacher: But it's definitely not not teaching
(Extract from interview with teacher)

The distinctiveness of the council meetings was confirmed by my observations of other aspects of the school. The teacher did admonish councillors twice but this did not appear to detract from the councillors' sense of fun and freedom. By contrast, I was struck by how suddenly the mood in school could change. For example, prior to the assembly a teacher started shouting at a child, and at the end the head teacher suddenly started shouting at another. In the latter instance, the shouting broke a jovial mood and I noted:

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The two episodes of shouting by (male) teachers I found quite startling. I was not prepared to have to adjust so quickly between moods

(Extract from research diary)

Clearly, school children have to negotiate their way between these different spaces everyday. As much as the councillors welcome the distinctive space of the council, it provides a challenge as yet another space in and out of which they have to navigate.

The combination of the two types of knowledge councillors had: of children's experiences and of the school as a system, placed them in a unique position. Their positioning within their relationships with both adults and children revealed this. While having to adapt to adult decision making structures, councillors were also learning ways of managing adults in order to secure their desired aim. The teacher was instrumental in this process, for example by advising councillors as to how most appropriately to approach other adult staff. Arising from their system-knowledge councillors could find the requests from some of the other children frivolous and unrealistic. Responses of '*Oh my God*', '*not another one*', and '*typical*' were quite common to children's letters. The council had to reply guided by this system-knowledge as to what was feasible, while not appearing too dismissive of the request. The formula they learnt from the teacher was illustrated by these councillors:

Councillor: we would like to
Councillor: but we can't

(Extract from notes of meeting 2)

Interestingly, this was so well internalised, that the councillors gave this reply even when the teacher was absent from the meeting:

Councillor: When we do have our assembly we could say well we would like to have a shop for playtimes but we don't have enough money or food or stuff to make

(Extract from notes of meeting 6)

The clearest indication of where the council was positioning itself came in the assembly, with both adults and children present. The chair read out a letter which the council had received from a child who was requesting a swimming pool:

Have a swimming pool; some children laughed. However, it was the adults who laughed when [Chair] gave her response, that the council was trying to save money not spend it

(Extract from assembly observation notes)

I concluded from this exchange that the council was more closely aligned with the adults at that moment on that issue.

Organisational competence

Following the grounded theory approach, the two theories above contributed to a 'core category' (as defined by Strauss, 1987, p. 36) of 'organisational competence'. This was a concept first coined by de Montigny (1998) from a study of young people in the care system. He suggested that there were costs associated with being a representative of such young people, not least that they could experience a conflict of loyalties between the needs of their

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peer group and the needs of the organisational system. Ultimately, this could result in the young people being 'coopted' (p. 208) by the welfare organisation. That the school council had not disturbed the school as an organisation, despite its potential to do so, suggests that the school has successfully accommodated it within its existing decision making structures. While this offers support for de Montigny's position, the concept of organisational competence as it stands risks overplaying structural factors and overlooking the impact of children's agency. By studying the councillors' action and competence, it is clear that they were not simply coopted by the structure but were impacting on it in a number of ways. These are highlighted within the key features of the organisational competence of the case study school council, which fall under the following four headings:

1. Boundaried impact. Perceptions within the school of the council's agency were high. However, the council could only impact in certain areas and councillors had to learn these boundaries. Nevertheless, the council must have some impact, otherwise the rationale for its existence would be questioned and the motivation of the councillors (and probably teacher helper) might decline.
2. Competent performance. Councillors displayed a wide range of skills and competencies, both during the council meetings and in communication with others. The council provides the opportunity for the acquisition of certain types of knowledge and development of other capacities such as 'confidence'. Acting responsibly was another facet of performance, defined by the head teacher as not 'in a childlike way'.
3. Distinctive space. Councillors and the teacher showed an ability to co-create an environment which felt distinctive for them within school. This allowed the teacher to occupy a more ambiguous role and for their relationships to be based on less overt and abrupt forms of adult control. Councillors felt very positive about their role and the distinctiveness of this space was a significant reason.
4. Distinctive position. Councillors occupied a distinctive position within school arising from the duality of their knowledge bases: experience as children and greater knowledge of the school as a system. They also had to learn strategies for managing the ambivalence of this position, by managing their relationships with others differently. With adults, the authority of the existing decision making structures was accepted, yet councillors sought to learn how to influence them most effectively. With children, they had to provide a conduit for their wishes on the one hand, while accepting the need to educate them and manage their expectations on the other.

This final point supports Hutchby and Moran-Ellis's contention that children can handle 'alternative knowledges' 'in parallel' (1998, p. 21). A great variety of operational and organisational arrangements exist for school councils, as I found in my phone survey and as reported by others. Consequently, organisational competence will present very differently according to the outcomes of negotiations between different actors within different settings. This proposition supports the argument that: 'children's social competence is a constantly negotiated dynamic' (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998, p. 15). Further study is required to explore the diversity of organisational competences achieved through forums such as school councils, thereby helping to further elucidate links in the broader debate between children's agency and structures they are located within.

Finally, it is possible to locate the organisational competence of the case study school councillors according to the various discourses related to participation through school councils. Within this case study, the skills development discourse seemed to be the most

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explicitly drawn upon. There was no explicit reference to children's rights and such a discourse would not be supported by the insecurity of the school council's position reflected in issues of time ownership. Not integrating the school council within 'school time' risks undermining its perceived legitimacy within the school. Ironically, Crick's (QCA, 1998) compromise of promoting school councils but not recommending that they be a statutory requirement for fear of overburdening teachers, may place greater burdens on teachers as they struggle to support a school council in 'their' time.

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