VALUING THEIR VOICES: STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

SALLY VARNHAM*, MAXINE EVERS, TRACEY BOOTH & COSTA AVGOLSTINOS

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Formal recognition of the rights of children is embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) The almost universal ratification of this Convention has led to the reinforcement of children as equal citizens and to a mounting global discussion on the rights of children in all facets of society Article 12 (1) provides for democratic principles in terms of respect for the views of the child In many countries attention is now being paid to the exercise of this right in decision-making and in conflict resolution in schools Such processes are being discussed in terms of not only engaging children and young people in their schools and in their education but also being instrumental in enhancing the development of citizens in a democratic society Against a background of research in comparative jurisdictions which discusses school democracy and practising citizenship we set out to investigate the extent to which such practices may be implemented in school processes and procedures and the effect of such implementation in Australian schools

For our study we employed a qualitative design in a cohort of schools in the Australian state of New South Wales [1] The data was gathered by means of semi structured interviews of school personnel students and parents and observation of participatory and conflict resolution practices in the schools The aim was to identify the nature of various practices how they are implemented the understanding and perceptions of these practices and their effect on the school communities The project was designed to enhance an understanding of the concept of pupil democracy how it may operate as part of formal practice in Australian schools and the extent to which citizenship practices in schools may lead students to develop a greater sense of their place as democratic citizens in society Ultimately as legal academics our aim is to gather a body of evidence to inform discourse relating to the incorporation of democratic practices within education policy and legislation [2]

I INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) has led to a mounting global discussion on the rights of children in all facets of society [3] This article focuses on the right of children to express their views and to have their voices to be heard as set out in Article 12(1) of UNCROC This Article provides for the right of children for participation in decision making as follows [4]

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child

Address for correspondence Professor Sally Varnham, Faculty of Law, University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway, Sydney, NSW 2007, Australia Email sally varnham@uts edu au

In the education context the manifestation of this right may be seen in the extent to which students are afforded the right to participate in school decision making including approaches to antisocial behaviour and the resolution of conflict It is suggested that respect for the views of the child as set out in Article 12 and implemented in school practices, procedures and cultures, provides a strong basis for the development of citizenship and democratic principles and ultimately nation-building [5]

Practices which encourage student participation in school decision making and in conflict resolution are often referred to as 'school democracy' and they have been the subject of debate elsewhere for several decades This is particularly the case in the European Community where there are now formal bodies designed to enhance the incorporation of the student voice at a national level within their education systems and locally in their schools [6] While such concepts have been slow to enter public consciousness in Australia there are many indications that they are gathering momentum Now, increasingly, educators are taking the initiative in their schools to introduce citizenship by practice and example within the school structure by 'doing' rather than just 'teaching' Many of these practices are associated with active citizenship and democracy, and are based on participation in decision making in schools, including in the restoration of interpersonal relationships However it seems that the implementation of such measures is reliant on the impetus of keen principals or staff members and the ideas are yet to attract the attention of education policy makers, legislators,[7] and designers of university education curricula The teaching of citizenship in schools generally appears to remain concentrated on limited civics classroom education

This article considers a research project undertaken by the authors against the worldwide background of research into democratic practices in schools [8] The project involved a selected cohort of New South Wales schools who employ participatory and restorative practices within their day to day operations [9]

II Project Methodology

Our research asked the following questions

1   To what extent is education a process in which children and young people may be active, valued and significant participants?

2   What processes may be incorporated within the management and governance of a school to provide for a meaningful involvement of students in building the school community and in solving problems within that community?

3   What is the extent to which participatory and restorative practices are incorporated within the processes of the cohort of schools in New South Wales that operate on democratic principles?

4   What is the effect of these processes, from the perception of students, parents and teaching staff of these schools?

It aimed to gain an understanding of how participatory and restorative practices may be incorporated within the governance and management processes of schools in Australia and their effectiveness in these key respects

•   assisting the engagement of students in their school communities and in their education within those communities,

- enabling restorative rather than retributive approaches to conflict resolution and discipline in schools;
- inculcating citizenship and human rights principles through the incorporation of democratic practice within school communities; and
- providing young people with the 'tools, knowledge and experience' to be able to assimilate knowledge and make informed choices within a democratic society, and the interest to do so.

The project's objective was to broaden knowledge and understanding of the nature and practice of student participatory and restorative practices in schools through studying a selected cohort of schools in NSW. These are located in both Sydney and regional NSW, and come from different parts of the education sector – state, private, religious and primary and secondary. As discussed above, the terms 'participatory', 'restorative' and 'democratic' are used to refer to practices that involve and engage students to some extent in the operation of the school, in teaching and learning, and in student behaviour and conflict.

The aim was to get a diverse cohort of schools but it rapidly became apparent that the practices were less common in high schools – those high schools which used such processes tended to be religious schools. Anecdotal evidence suggested that for large state high schools it was 'too hard', the schools were simply too big and they were struggling with a large number of issues with little support.

Specifically in aiming to address the questions set out above, the research was comprised of the following components:

- Interviews with members of the school community: Members of the school community were invited to participate in the research project through the school newsletter. The researchers used a prepared interview schedule that was arranged around certain themes; key open-ended questions were included to give participants ample opportunity to raise issues of importance not already identified.
- Observation: two researchers attended the schools for the purposes of observing school meetings, conflict resolution processes and school activities more generally.
- Analysis of school policies and material published by the schools, for example, on their websites.

Prior to embarking on the school visits component of the research we obtained Ethics Approval from the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training SERAP approval, and the approval from the relevant Catholic Education Office. In addition we discussed our research in detail with the subject schools, and in each case the principals and the school boards (where relevant) gave their approval - they were enthusiastic and accommodating.

III SELECTION OF SCHOOLS

The schools in the project had either expressed interest in being involved after attending presentations that discussed the background to this project, or they had been identified as having implemented democratic or restorative practices. Because of the period of time it took to get the approval that is required from the New South Wales Department of Education, Training and Communities (the Department of Education and Training), some of the subject schools that had

initially been keen to take part had lost interest, or the teacher or principal involved had moved on The result was that time was lost as other schools had then to be identified and approached While this posed a problem, there is an important point to be taken It made it abundantly clear that in many cases the use of these practices in schools was dependent upon one keen individual rather than being embedded in school culture This was significant in itself

It was clear from the beginning that schools that have introduced student participatory practices sit on a spectrum The first school in this study, Casuarina identifies as a fully democratic school During the initial stages of the research that took place at that school, it was clear that within the school the two aspects that were being considered, participatory practices in school decision making, and restorative practice, were inevitably intertwined There, both play an integral role in the development of a culture that gives young people a voice and a responsibility for and an engagement in, their educational environment However, it became equally clear as we moved on to the other schools, that there is a wide variety of practices and perceptions of democratic or restorative practices in schools

The more 'traditional' schools we visited set out their practices to varying degrees within their school policy documents and promotional material, and, commendably, they have incorporated some democratic practices within their structures and processes They referred to their practices variously as 'restorative justice' in the narrow sense relating to school discipline, or 'restorative practice' in a wider sense as embracing a whole school philosophy From our sample of schools, and a cursory look at other's websites, it seemed that it may have become a 'selling point' for schools to identify as 'restorative' or having a philosophy of student inclusion in decision making

Casuarina is an independent pre and primary school (ages 3 to 12) in a reasonably affluent area of Sydney It is founded on principles of innovation in education thinking and child-centred education and it has not always had an easy time with education authorities LillyPilly and Wattle are state primary schools within the Sydney area LillyPilly is in an area that is predominantly white middle class and well-educated The school personnel invariably commented on the increase in the school enrolment in recent years that they attributed largely to its 'inclusive restorative philosophy' that is based on 'listening, reflection and the use of respectful, open-minded questioning techniques that promote communication risk-taking, self-review and the learning of new skills and behaviours by students' (from the school's promotional material) Wattle has also experienced rapid growth in recent years, due largely to the expansion of large apartment developments in the area, coupled with the desirability of the area for new immigrants The school is a reflection of the culturally and racially diverse community in which it sits Jacaranda is a regional Catholic High School It is relatively new, and reasonably small, and has been set up to embrace some student participatory and restorative practices (rather than their being developed later as with the older established schools that were studied) Kauri is a regional New South Wales primary school, some 2 hours' drive from Sydney It is one of the 6 'feeder' schools into Wallangara Wallangara is a large co-educational state high school that is the partner high school for the community of schools in the regional area It was thought that the combination of Kauri and Wallangara would provide an interesting study of the continuum of practices in the primary/high school transition Gumtree is also a large co-educational high school It is in the outskirts of Sydney, in a relatively low socio-economic catchment

What follows is a discussion of our impressions of the schools focussed on the research questions We look first at the formal provisions set out within school policies and website school promotional material Then, in considering the nature of participation, we adopt the following criteria, as far is possible, from our interviews and observations We look at the body/ies for

student participation, the membership of these bodies and the sorts of decisions they are able to make, student autonomy in these bodies and how they are viewed by the school community including students, teachers and parents.

IV THE SCHOOLS: PROCESSES AND PERCEPTIONS

A *Casuarina*[10]

Casuarina is a member of the group of schools outside the mainstream in Australia and New Zealand that belong to organisations such as the International Democratic Network (IDEN). The philosophy of these schools is that Article 26(2) of the International Declaration of Children's Rights, which is directed towards freedom, tolerance and understanding, constitutes a framework for their day to day practice.[11] Although these schools are bound to operate within state and federal legislation, including prescribed curricula, they rely as far as possible upon student voice to regulate every aspect from the schedule of their learning to the day to day running of the school community, including behavior management and conflict resolution. The school philosophy echoes the words of researcher Grille: 'A fundamental principle is that children are more motivated to learn, and they learn better. to the extent that they have a choice over how and what they learn'.[12]

Casuarina's self-description as a fully democratic school was reflected in both our observations of practices and our interviews with students, parents and teachers. Its philosophy and values, which are characterised as a whole school approach to inclusion, participation and responsibility, were clearly evident through the use of shared language, beliefs and commitment. The Articles of Association of the school state that the school will provide an environment that 'respects the individuality of the child, fosters self-determination in the child ... and stresses co-operation rather than competition, allowing for pupil participation in the affairs of the school and to encourage involvement in the community outside the school. In an exercise involving all members of the school community, Casuarina formulated a statement of its Core Beliefs and Values. These state, among other things that the school 'empower[s] children with communication skills so that they can learn to take responsibility for themselves, to cooperate with others and to effectively resolve conflicts and that it is committed to 'transparent, democratic, consultative and contestable governance that is accessible to teachers, parents and children'.

The main formal vehicles for student participation are the class meetings and the whole school meetings held weekly. Each class, and every age group, takes it in turns to organise the agenda and to chair the school meetings. The matters to be discussed may be fed from the class meetings, but may also come from individuals. Following discussion, voting plays a very important part of these meetings with each individual's vote carrying equal weight. Outside of the formal meeting structures, we observed, and were told of, other practices for the incorporation of student voice, for example, in learning. One teacher interviewed told us that the process for her junior class was that she would tell the students what they needed to cover in terms of curricula and they would produce ideas for how they wished to cover this, which she would then develop as a class work plan.

From our observations the school philosophy, values and beliefs were borne out in practice. Teachers, students and parents all emphasised the importance of the language used in all school interactions, for example, 'I' statements, 'agreements' rather than 'rules'. While the autonomy of the individuals was stressed through self-paced learning and the flexibility of teachers to accommodate each student's needs, there seemed to be a real sense that the classes 'pull together'

as a community, respecting each other's needs and the needs of the whole community as well as a lack of competitiveness. This was evidenced on a class level by the students' say in their learning environment, at a school level through their respect for others and shared responsibility for the whole school environment (demonstrated at the school meetings and rhetoric in the interviews), and in terms of the caring interaction between the older and younger children. This school has no school principal, and 'agreements' rather than rules are made collectively at school meetings.

In terms of conflict resolution, it is important to note that Casuarina is a small independent primary and pre-primary school with a relatively homogeneous demographic. International research indicates a relationship between conflict in schools and the cultural, ethnic and religious differences, which may not exist to any significant extent in this student and parent body.[13] This reservation, however, relates to the propensity for conflict rather than the ability of the school community to deal with that which inevitably arises in any school situation. There was a strong feeling of community togetherness, supportiveness and closeness. The children participated actively in all matters from how they wished to learn the prescribed curricula to behaviour management in the school. They were able to raise any issue within the classroom and in the school generally and this is discussed and voted on at a classroom and school level. Students at all levels who we interviewed were able to clearly articulate their role in the school, in terms of their relationships with peers and their learning. Issues relating to behaviour and peer conflict within the school were dealt with by either the students themselves through the conflict resolution skills the school provided them with, or by the school as a whole (in the case of wider issues).

Our observations showed teachers to be part of the groups of students, teaching by working together and discussing how and why things should be done, or existed as they were, rather than at the front of the class by a whiteboard. They were relaxed and warm with the students. Observations and interviews with teachers showed us that to teach in a school such as this was, on the one hand, incredibly challenging and confronting, and on the other, strongly rewarding. Everything was flexible and negotiable and the children were questioning, rather than the traditional model of acceptance that what the teacher says, goes. A strong feeling of commitment to the school came through all our interviews with both teachers and parents. If there were reservations, they were to do with a concern with students having to leave the school and be educated in the secondary years in a more formal school environment.

One of the strongest points that emerged from our interviews at this school was the need for a certain type of personality in teachers who could work in this school and the need for particular training in the school's philosophy and practices. An example was that all teachers were required to attend a specific conflict resolution course, which was in line with the school's philosophy. Parents also were encouraged to do this course. We met teachers who had undertaken their practical training during their teaching degree (pre-service) at the school who had returned to become part of the permanent teaching staff.

The issue of the training of teachers in democratic and restorative practices was to become a familiar theme at other schools and concern was often expressed in this regard.

B *Kauri*

Kauri has very clear processes for student participation set out in its written policies. At this school, student participation in decision making is integrated into the student wellbeing policy, which explicitly links it to enhancing school discipline by setting out the rights and responsibilities of all members of school community, not just the students.[14] On this point, it seemed to go further

than other schools, where the emphasis was on 'restorative practice' that embraced some student participation, but was not specifically directed at taking students' views into account in matters of school relationships.

Kauri's policy sets out a number of vehicles for student participation and leadership that target the whole cohort, not just senior students. This was interesting as, from the research generally, it became clear that including all students was one of the most challenging aspects. Two familiar mechanisms are the Student Representative Council (the SRC) and the class meetings. The roles are set out clearly in the policy, and the focus is about responsibility, another familiar value.

The main area in which student participation played a big part was in relationship building and conflict resolution, and this was largely due to the enthusiasm of the school principal in embedding the principles of Glasser's Choice Theory into the school.[15] Relationship building and restoration were practised through 'circles' in individual classrooms, where a ball was handed round, and only the person holding it was able to speak. The children seemed to respect this process and spoke openly about what was bothering them, such as another child's behaviour generally or towards them. The other child (or children) was then asked how they believed the problem could be put right. The processes observed were orderly, and the children seemed to be engaged in and respectful of them.

The vehicle for student participation in other school matters was through the SRC. At class meetings students put proposals to the SRC member attending, and these were opened up for class discussion. The proposals that were put to a vote and accepted by the majority were taken forward to the SRC to discuss, which in turn raised the ones they deemed appropriate with the teaching staff. It was of interest to observe that, at the class meetings, only about one third of the students were actively involved in putting forward ideas and in the discussions that followed. No conclusion could really be drawn from this, as the atmosphere was generally conducive to student input (although on one occasion we noticed that the amount of discussion was closely controlled by the teacher present). Although much was said about the process for involving students in these types of decisions, we were unable to ascertain how much weight was given ultimately to their views.

While all the processes were in place, and there was a great deal of enthusiasm for them on the part of the teachers, we observed that they maintained a tight control on what transpired. The parents interviewed were aware of the avenues for student participation and the students we interviewed also responded positively – 'you do have a say'. One teacher described it as a 'fair dinkum say' rather than just notional. The same teacher said that the school advertises for a particular sort of teacher [as someone] 'involved in non-coercive behaviour management'. There were two pre-service teachers at the school, who spoke very positively about their experience with the school's philosophy and practices, and concern at their lack of knowledge and training in this regard coming in to the school. These comments once again drew attention to a lack of teacher education in these types of processes as a common theme.

C *LillyPilly*

According to the policy documents of this school, restorative practice is more than just a set of processes that are reactive to problems. Its underlying philosophy is embedded in the school culture and in classroom teaching and learning. Although in terms of student participation, there is not the same system of 'negotiated' learning as at Casuarina, its emphasis on relationships and responsibility is in many respects similar. The school's policy sets out a number of processes and

strategies to be used in the event of inappropriate or unacceptable behavior, which is different to Casuarina and is more reminiscent of a traditional school. Though having said that, restorative practice does play a major role in conflict, particularly with conferences in 'classroom, corridor and playground' as needed. Like Casuarina, circles are used. The children interviewed spoke very positively about this method of dealing with problems, talking about 'owning the behaviour' and 'no blame'. It was interesting that the school policy also talks about peer mediation in bullying situations, but this was not mentioned in any of the interviews.[16]

The vehicles for all student participation differ from those at Casuarina and Kauri. The formal student representative body uses a parliamentary framework intended to model and practise democracy. The way it is structured gives a number of children opportunities each year to participate. Students are either senators or members of a house of representatives, which have regular meetings that are managed in a formal style. One parent said that the number of opportunities for children to participate reflected the school culture of 'having a go'. But it did seem that the children were not as involved in decision making across all facets of the school as they were at Casuarina. The children interviewed talked mainly about their participation being in respect of practical matters around the school, such has having a 'bubbler' in a certain place in the playground, and to do with things they felt the students needed and arrangements for fundraising for them.

Like Casuarina and Kauri, LillyPilly has a philosophy of inclusiveness, voice, listening, reflection and respect. This was borne out in interviews with school parents and teachers, and observation of processes such as 'circles' in the classroom. While, as with Kauri, it is relatively traditional in terms of classroom layout, teaching and lesson design and content, restorative practice forms the basis of the learning experience. Again, although they use different frameworks and trainers to Casuarina, the emphasis is similarly on a common language. Examples of this are 'I' statements and having 'voice space', dialogue, responsibility and consequences.[17]

The Assistant Principal said that changing the school culture had made a huge difference to the school, and embedding the philosophy was largely due to the dedication of the previous Principal and had survived past her leaving the school. This was hugely significant in light of the experience with the other schools approached, where restorative practice had been a 'crusade' of a keen individual and it had not lasted once that person had gone elsewhere.

Anecdotally, LillyPilly has gone from having the worst reputation in the area to being not only sought after as a school but also becoming the centre of the local community. Again, in common with Casuarina, the adult interviewees (teachers, parents) all emphasised the need for commitment from everyone, that all in the school community have to 'be on board'. In their view, it needed to be taken home and for the families to use restorative practice also. One parent told the story of her daughter at 5 said to her at home 'you're not sharing the voice space', and how she was initially taken aback as feeling that she should be the voice of authority in the house. She then realised it was part of the philosophy of all having a voice, and listening to others, which was emanating from the school. She regarded this as a positive step in her child's development.

The teachers interviewed were positive about restorative practice and said similar things to the Kauri teachers. Universally, they expressed the view that they felt it was empowering for children, it enhanced their love of learning and that the children felt safe, confident and comfortable. Although, like Kauri, it felt much more structured and traditional than Casuarina, this view was certainly the impression gained from visits to the school. In interviews with the newer teachers, it was once again clear that they had come to the school with very little knowledge of, or training in, any form of restorative practice.

This was an emergence once again of mention of a 'gap' in teacher education. We feel there is an urgent need for this to be addressed at this level, rather than relying on professional development at some later stage.

D *Wattle*

As with LillyPilly, Wattle has no official student participation policy. The school, however, advises on its website that it promotes values around justice and democracy and active participation. In common with Casuarina and LillyPilly, there was a strong sense of community and an observable connection with parents, teachers and staff. As one parent said: 'I think the school does a lot to explain what is happening'. The Assistant Principal knew the names of parents coming into the school as well as the names of the pre-school siblings. All parents who were interviewed commented on the welcoming character of the school and the sense of community when joining the school. The student community was more diverse than Casuarina and LillyPilly. It is larger than Casuarina but smaller than LillyPilly. What was noticeable at Wattle is its acknowledgment given to Indigenous culture with a Torres Strait and Indigenous group, school ceremonies for 'Sorry Day' and National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NADOC) week as well as indigenous artwork in the school reception. An example of the significance of incorporating indigenous culture into the school was given when a year 6 student attended a religious high school that did not recognise NADOC week. She told the High School Principal what her primary school had done and, as a result, the High School recognised NADOC week in the school community.

The school considered itself to have a philosophy embracing meaningful student participation. From our observations, the involvement by students was largely undertaken by class meetings and the Student Representative Council (SRC). The latter is a fairly standard feature even in the most traditional schools, although the level of student autonomy and impact differs. Through these vehicles, the interviews with students, teachers and staff suggested that student decision making was mainly focused on the playground and environment, for example, the SRC achieved changes in the school, such as recycling, bubblers and a whiteboard in the playground, the installation of play equipment and the addition of soap in the toilets.

There was a view that student participation was 'teacher-driven' and based on a 'top-down approach' with teachers citing the ways in which students could participate, such as fundraising, as not being particularly student-focused. An example that was given was a cake stall involving the students but without the students having input as to where the proceeds would go. Part of the reason for this may be the age of the children. For example, one teacher said she had to suggest to the students to write a letter to the local council as part of the solution to a problem they were working on. Parents generally saw the school structure as positive, allowing the school to be safe and providing an opportunity for students to develop great 'self-esteem'. As one parent commented 'there is an expectation that children will do the right thing –a level of trust'.

One year 6 student said he had a 'little bit to say' in the decisions about school. Most students' experiences were focused on the friendship and positive feelings they enjoyed as peer support buddies and as school leaders. Leaders are chosen through the democratic process of whole school vote, with interested year 5 students making a presentation as to why they should be voted for and, as one teacher described the process, 'like politicians'. As another year 6 student commented, being a leader is 'getting to know what it is to be a teacher, seeing how hard it is, appreciating what our teachers do'.

The gap between theory and practice in student participation and engagement was very marked from Casuarina Kauri and LillyPilly The 'top down' approach is significant and requires further research to assess whether it restricts opportunities for students to practise independent and democratic participation

The school promoted restorative practice through classroom charts and reference in its Annual Report to teacher training in such practices The students and staff were reminded of the restorative practice principles with charts in classrooms offices and hall, the charts setting out the steps in the 'Restorative Justice Plan' The students pointed to the plan when asked if they knew what restorative justice was When asked what the plan meant, two year 6 students responded with 'sometimes talking to each other co-operating with the teacher, sometimes the teacher will tell us to say sorry' and 'negotiating, works like a treaty or agreement' Most of the staff interviewed embraced a restorative justice philosophy, although feedback told us that there were no clear guidelines and a lack of consistency in its application As one teacher put it '[It] needs to be structured, 1-2-3 reminders need clear procedures for next stage, Follow through at end may not be consistent, what's the next step here? and that individual teachers seem to 'do their own thing'

From observations it seemed that while there is a move to incorporate the language of restorative practice and the offer of refresher courses in restorative justice to new and existing staff there is no formal program to get everyone on board The discussions around training at Wattle, and at some of the other schools, highlighted how crucial it is, both initially and as an ongoing process At Wattle, some teachers had received initial training which, as one teacher commented, made them feel 'empowered', while some teachers had not been trained and one teacher commented on how difficult it was in their first year dealing with 'challenging behavior'

E *Jacaranda*

While this school has no official policy embedding student participation in decision making, generally it has policies regarding restorative practice(s) in the context of conflict resolution and learning It was interesting that the focus is on restorative practice and we wondered whether, without it being verbalised members of the school community were taught to consider student participation as a feature of restorative practice It gave rise to many questions is student participation less important and can there be a school premised on restorative practice where participation in decision-making is not considered important? What is the relationship between the two?

At Jacaranda there was a very limited opportunity for student participation in terms of whole school structures In contrast to the schools above particularly Casuarina, Kauri and LillyPilly, students apply for leadership and facilitator positions much like a job and are then selected to be leaders in particular houses Here there is no democratic process of voting, which is considered to be so important at Casuarina and LillyPilly (indeed central to its operation in the case of Casuarina) One area that seems unique to Jacaranda is the process for student participation in the quality, in addition to the process of teaching and learning, called Connected Learning Experiences, or CLE Student facilitators take students out of classes to form focus groups that discuss ideas about teaching and subject (unit) planning The idea is that the students have direct input in what is done It sounded rather challenging for the teachers and the comment was made that they either loved it or hated it, and that some feel threatened by it One comment from a teacher was that 'for students I think the process is a bit invisible' The same teacher said that

there is 'rhetoric and reality in the classroom, they are told that it is distributive leadership, that ideas are valued but not really'.

Another teacher said that those selected for leadership roles tend to mirror staff. The students interviewed though said that they were happy with the system because it was not about popularity. One teacher said that students do not have meaningful decision-making in the way the school runs. She said 'I wish they did but we are better than other schools'.

Interestingly, the students interviewed said that they felt they had big input in CLE. Although they described the process in positive terms, we wondered whether this was because they were told that it was good and that their input was valued – rather than really understanding whether it was or not. They said that changes had been made based on what the students said, but they were not able to give any examples.

One parent interviewed was not aware of student participation opportunities, which indicated either that their child was not engaged in it or that not much is made of in the school. It must be noted, however, that at this school we found it difficult to recruit parents to be interviewed and, therefore, we felt that little can be drawn from the interviews we did. Was this a comment on any lack of 'community' feeling at the school or was it simply because it was a high school where there would ordinarily perhaps be less parental involvement?

Also in terms of behaviour management, Jacaranda has a well-developed framework that is very different to other schools. Restorative practice(s) are part of the policy that is based on making sure that all members of the school community are in the right relationship with each other and the world. This framework uses a different language to that used in other schools and it talks about 'acts of connection', 'disconnection' and 'reconnection'. Language aside, it is based on familiar values of inclusiveness, community, choice, equality, respect and sensitivity. As with the schools above, restorative practice is based on the use of particular processes, for example, asking certain questions and circles. There are, however, significant differences. At Jacaranda, the processes are prescribed and the reconnections look to all intents and purposes to be detentions. The students interviewed did not seem to have definite views one way or another about these and accepted them, though some did say they can be for too minor things in their view (one group gave the example about putting their bags in the wrong place in the school) rather than for relationship problems.

Like Casuarina, Kauri and LillyPilly, there is in-service teacher training and a theoretical basis for restorative practice. One of the teachers said that when a particular restorative process is concluded there is a much more settled feeling, so he was of the view that it is effective. Another teacher saw this as one of the strongest dimensions of the school.

F *Wallangara*

Wallangara is a large state high school which is fed into by Kauri. The School Principal said that the aim is to set up common language and procedures with feeder schools such as Kauri. In reality, this was curious and we could understand the difficulties of implementing the same processes because of the differences in the size and nature of the schools. Kauri has a strong philosophy of restorative practice (as described above) based on Glasser's Choice Theory, but from what was observed, and from the interviews there, it did not feel as if Wallangara could be called a restorative school. The school policies are silent on restorative practice and the only real nod in that direction seems to be the peer mediation that is offered to students in junior years. The students spoke positively about this program, although in an interview with two peer mediators

it seemed that the process was very seldom used and they had very little understanding of the principles behind it and its operation.

The policy does say that the school fosters student leadership, but there is no indication that the students participate in decisions that affect the school. One of the parents interviewed thought that the Student Representative Council (SRC) had a lot of 'pull', but the examples given were largely to do with the arranging of social occasions. The students interviewed saw the SRC as organised and explained that it held regular meetings with agendas. They believed that being a member of the SRC helped those involved develop good social skills. The Principal also viewed student leadership as being about service in the community.

The discipline policy does not mention restorative practice, but rather it incorporates the traditional options. In his interview, the Principal expressed strong views about the need for suspensions in showing students 'boundaries'. In his view, the school practice of suspensions as the preferred disciplinary option worked well in the school, and in most cases did not detrimentally affect the student concerned or the school community. The Principal said that the school 'do[es] Glasser but doesn't do the victim forum' and it was unclear what was meant by this. He said expressly that there is no time to do restorative justice. We felt this was understandable perhaps in such a large school, where demands on resources must present considerable challenges. There were indications of an interest in the concepts, particularly in terms of the peer mediation program, but in reality the difficulties in any real commitment were perhaps considered insurmountable. The students who were interviewed generally expressed their opinion that it was a 'fairly peaceful' school, which gave rise to the view that, despite the rather piecemeal approach to principles of restorative practice, something was working.

The Deputy Head Boy interviewed was a young man with a real enthusiasm for greater student participation and he talked about ideas he was working on for involving the younger members of the school community in decision making in the school (not just the SRC). He also was working on programs and education in the school to deal with peer conflict, and he had produced an Anti-Bullying Booklet which appeared to be a valuable resource and was a very worthwhile student initiative. So, while at this school, there seemed to be the 'underpinnings' of restorative principles, it has to be accepted that the implementation of restorative measures is much more complex in a large diverse high school. This was the case even when some of the children have come into the school from that environment at their previous school.

This is clearly an area for the focus of future research.

G *Gumtree*

Gumtree is a large and diverse co-educational school. We visited there to observe and discuss with teachers and students a new innovation known as the Student Commission, which involves a significant level of student participation. This system has recently been introduced to provide a vehicle for student voice in the school. The idea for the Commission, which is thus far unique in Australia, came from a presentation at a 2010 conference attended by the Principal and some of the teachers. The presentation concerned student commissions and learning in the Harris Federation of Schools:[18] Gumtree's Principal had been immediately impressed with the results shown from this system. We were told that, initially, some teachers had resisted the prospect of students telling them how to teach in their classrooms. However, the school then conducted an analysis to discover what areas teachers thought the student voice could be involved through student commissions and

as a result, four heads of school life were identified: school environments, learning, leadership and community perception.

As originally conceived, a cross section of students would be encouraged to become student commissioners rather than just the 'good kids' but disappointingly this did not happen and it attracted predominantly the most diligent students, described as the 'future leaders' of the school. A great deal of planning went into establishing the Commission with student focus and a staff development day to achieve a wide consensus of ideas. Thirteen teachers volunteered to become mentors for the program (there are now 23 teachers involved in the program). The parent body was also consulted and they showed considerable keenness, many attending the successful launch night with students and teacher/mentors.

There had been a training day for the students, which involved working through all four headings, not only developing projects within the policies and procedures of the school, but also discussing matters such as developing leadership, critical thinking and 'having a say'. They felt it was important to distinguish the Commission from the school's Student Representative Council (SRC).[19] which is more involved in organising special events in the school than in developing a culture of meaningful student involvement in school decision making on an ongoing basis, assimilated into school culture.

We observed meetings of different branches of the Student Commission, which were made up of students from a wide range of backgrounds and ethnicity. The bodies have been divided into groups that run particular projects and we observed meetings on various topics from school uniforms, the school environment - the playground and the classrooms, communication and teacher interaction. At each group, the students involved were able to clearly articulate their aims and objectives and to discuss the processes they had used to ascertain the views of the student body, for example, for the proposed school uniform and the playground layout and resourcing. There was a high level of involvement of one particular teacher in these meetings but it was predominantly in the role of mentor, of assisting the students to take ownership of the particular project and to assist them in coping with the difficulties of working together as a group and in interaction between group members. The leadership group and the teacher interaction group both discussed administering surveys to elicit the views of students, and the problems they encountered with both some students, not being taken seriously, and some teachers who they found 'rude and unavailable'. One of the matters discussed in the teacher interaction group was the need for both to respect each other.

Feedback had been sought from student participants to get their perceptions of the operation of the student commission in its early stages. On the positive side, they said that it had an important role in both getting their ideas and being their voice, to bring changes which would improve the school, and to implement what they wanted. On the negative side, they had found some of the teacher mentors were difficult to talk to and unhelpful, and that it was difficult to allocate time for the work involved on top of their other work and activities.

In terms of managing conflict in the school, Gumtree has students who are peer mediators in a peer support system. The peer mediators trained to do student interventions were drawn from Year 9, identified as the most problematic cohort. Matters are generally referred to the mediators through the year advisor or by student complaint. We were unable to get a clear view on the success or otherwise of this system. The peer support program has been operating for five years and essentially involves more senior students (Year 10) contacting the new Year 7 students at orientation and mentoring them for the first term of their first year. The program involves anti-discrimination and anti-bullying themes. Both these programs are regarded as connected and part

of student welfare generally. The school does not have a system of circles or conferencing but we were advised that some teachers deal with peer conflict issues on the basis of 'reality choice theory' in terms of consequences – you have two choices, behave or you're out. Despite this seemingly reactive approach, the teachers interviewed agreed that language was important.

V DISCUSSION

During our data collection and analyses it became increasingly evident that the term 'school democracy' is problematic. While the definition seemed clear to us at the beginning, it soon became cloudy. As citizens of a democratic system, the use of the term itself, and conceptualising it, is easy. Actualising it in the context of a school which is subject to a myriad of other practical considerations is not so smooth. It is not difficult to say that: 'In democratic societies, schools – among their other purposes – ought to serve as incubators of democracy',[20] but in the minds of most educators that is limited to citizenship education in the classroom.

The terms 'practising democracy' or 'practising citizenship' in the school context cover a broad spectrum as is shown in the above discussion. There are 'democratic schools' and there are schools with varying degrees of 'democratic processes' or 'citizenship processes'. There are often termed 'restorative practice or practices' or they identify themselves as 'restorative schools'. When discussing behaviour management and peer conflict, such as bullying, the schools often use the narrow vernacular of 'restorative justice' taken from the criminal justice system.

We struggled with the question: how is effectiveness to be measured? We gained an impression from time we spent in each school, from the atmosphere, its peacefulness and cohesion. Particularly, our views were gained from observations of particular procedures and, importantly, from interviews with members of the school community, the students, parents, and teachers which 'painted the picture'. Almost universally, the students were confident, and seemed to be engaged in, and proud of, their schools. The same could be said for parents who generally were supportive, and although there were some reservations in terms of school practices, they were a small minority. There is an important caveat however. While the schools were asked to call for volunteers to take part in the research, there may well have been some selection of students and parents. This is probably inevitable in research of this kind.

The need for teacher education in democratic measures, including citizenship education and restorative practice, came through as an unexpected central theme in our research. Teachers spoke about the absence of training and education in their degree and the lack of, or limited, professional training in specific practices, both at the time of commencing at a new school and as on-going development. Inevitably staff at the schools mentioned that they came to the school with very little or no knowledge of these practices. Some of the schools created opportunities for in-service training in restorative practices and there was general agreement that this was essential. Those who had recently completed their education degrees said that the focus in their courses had generally been on 'behaviour management' in the traditional sense, and on their obligations pursuant to education legislation and policy. An understanding of the philosophy and the practices of citizenship education, restorative practice and student engagement and participation should be a core part of the undergraduate curriculum in education courses. New graduates are the future executive leaders in schools and in teaching and learning policy development. In order to implement the processes and the practices that research tells us are essential to provide an environment where young people feel safe and valued, all teachers in the school community must be competent and confident in facilitating these processes and practices.

Participatory and restorative practices require a departure from the traditional perception of school operations and this mind shift requires theoretical and practical training at the undergraduate level and also on an on-going basis for professional teachers. All our subject schools demonstrate, to varying degrees, how this training could take place both in the schools and in professional development courses. This is commendable but we feel this is too important to be left to individual schools with precious resources in terms of funds and time.

VI CONCLUSION

Perhaps our most significant observation was the positive effect of greater student participation on school cultures, and this was reinforced over and over in our interviews. While accepting that our research was a small sample, we believe it to demonstrate clearly the value of engaging the student voice in meaningful decisions within the school community where everyone feels they can make a contribution which is taken seriously. Our visits covered a wide range of primary and secondary, state, independent and Catholic systemic schools and we saw that it was harder to achieve a 'buy-in' of all the key stakeholders in larger secondary school communities. However, it was not impossible and introduction of measures gradually led to acceptance.

There was a wide range of processes which had been implemented, most going further than reliance solely on the Student Representative Council, to class meetings, student commissions and 'parliaments' which involved children at all levels in the school. This is important. The major challenge was to have processes with wide engagement in terms of age, experience, and further than those children and young people who were generally considered to 'tow the line'. The processes which were implemented by schools are set out above, those with success varied on a school by school basis.

The importance of communication and language was a common theme. Respect and responsibility were emphasised and observed in terms of the language used, the individual interactions between staff and students, and students with each other, and on-going discussion involving the wider school community.

Our research demonstrates that it is possible with scant resources to introduce participatory and restorative processes and for them to be embraced at the heart of the school's philosophy and culture. However this is often due to the tireless work of an individual, at least in the early stages.

While the importance of the leadership of the school principal cannot be over-emphasised, the concept of democratic measures deserves wider and more serious consideration, including at a tertiary and government level. Key research which has been undertaken in Australia, the UK, the US and New Zealand relating to citizenship education and restorative practice in schools provides two notable conclusions.[21] First, it points to the failure of civics education programs in schools to prepare young people to function as citizens in a democratic society. It shows a need for schools to deliver an effective active citizenship program by 'demonstrat[ing] through their own internal structures and mechanisms that they operate as a democratic institution'.[22] Secondly, research points to the beneficial effects on school cultures of the implementation of varying degrees of restorative practices.[23]

The research project which is the subject of this article is set against a worldwide background of research into, and implementation of, restorative or democratic practices in schools. The object was to consider the exercise of the right to participation of children and young people in decision making in education environments and school communities. We set out to consider the range of practices, the extent to which they are implemented in a small cohort of New South Wales

schools and how they are perceived by members of the school communities By examining school policies, observing school practices and interviewing students, teachers and parents, we aimed to gain a picture of the ways in which participatory and restorative practices may be implemented in schools and their effectiveness

At one school, when teachers there were asked for ideas on what is needed to for 'citizenship' or 'democratic' principles to be put into practice in schools, they were generally agreed on the following

1   A clear philosophy and statement of values developed with consensus - subject to change as need arose as things progressed,

2   A balancing of the requirements of parents for a measure of academic success and principles of flexibility and negotiable learning,

3   Training of staff,

4   A 'buy-in' of all staff, parents and children to change,

5   Group regularly within the school to see what was working and what was not,

6   A commitment by all members of the school community to continuous training, trialling ideas, review and reflection

In our view these provide a useful set of principles which could provide a template for schools to introduce restorative and democratic practices However, the measurement of success in any sustainable way in terms of the development of citizenship principles which students take into society, calls for a longitudinal study which is beyond this research This is long overdue in Australia

Keywords student participation, school democracy, restorative practice, practising citizenship

ENDNOTES

1   New South Wales is the most populous state, with nearly 7 million people or a third of the total Australian population Education in Australia is an individual state and territory responsibility, although some funding for schools is provided by the federal government

2   One of the key findings of the *Euridem Project A Review of Pupil Democracy In Europe* (2005) Davies L & Kirkpatrick G, Childrens Rights Alliance of England, was that 'In European countries, there is firm and wide-ranging legislation to ensure that pupils are involved in school decision making Interestingly, in NSW through an initiative *Local Schools Local Decisions* (LSLD) in 2013 the Government stated its intention to implement educational reforms in all schools across NSW to 'ensuring that students are at the centre of school decision making' <http //www schools nsw edu au/ news/els/index php>

3   See for example in the UK, Childrens Rights Alliance for England (2013) *Childrens Rights and the Law <http //www crae org uk/childrens-rights-the-law/>*

4   Article 12 (1) United Nations Convention of the Child 1989 ratified by Australia 1990

5   See for example H Starkey, 'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Education for Cosmopolitan Citizenship' in F Waldron & B Ruane (eds) *Human Rights Education reflections on theory and practice* Dublin Liffey Press, 2010, M Print, S Ornstrom & N H Skovgaard, 'Education for Democratic Practices in schools and classrooms' (2002) 37(2) *European Journal of Education* 193 It is of interest to note also the initiative of US President Obama and the US Department of Education announced in '*Engagement in Democracy A Road Map and Call to Action* , U S Department of Education , January 2012

6   The European Students' Union (ESU) and the Organising Bureau of European Secondary Student Unions (OBESSU). For a discussion of these organisations see Hannan D & Shore L, 'Secondary Students in Europe', *Connect*, June 2014 23. For a comprehensive study, see *The Euridem Project* (2005) Children's Rights Alliance of England. The background to the research is discussed in the article by the same authors 'Democracy in Schools: Encouraging Responsibility and Citizenship through Student Participation in School Decision Making' (2014) 19(1) *International Journal of Law and Education* 73–91 which examines the literature relating to projects undertaken in Australia and in comparative jurisdictions which have considered practicing democracy or citizenship in schools.

7   The need for legislation was a key finding in the seminal research known as the L Davies & G Kirkpatrick (2005) *Euridem Project: A Review of Pupil Democracy In Europe*. Note 2 above.

8   For an analysis of the literature which provides the background for this research, see S Varnham, T Booth & M Evers, 'Let's Ask the Kids! Practising Citizenship and Democracy in Australian Schools' (2011) 16(2) *International Journal of Law and Education* 75–94; S Varnham, M Evers, T Booth & C Avgoustinos, 'Democracy in Schools: Encouraging Responsibility and Citizenship through Student Participation in School Decision Making (2014) 19(1) *International Journal of Law and Education* 73–91.

9   At the outset it is important to acknowledge the inspiration for this work provided by Roger Holdsworth and '*Connect*' journal for his unflagging devotion to student participation. His work has led us to consider the part law may play in this endeavor.

10   This school provided the case study in the first article relating to this project: S Varnham, T Booth & M Evers, 'Let's Ask the Kids! Practising Citizenship and Democracy in Australian Schools' (2011) 16(2) *International Journal of Law and Education* 75.

11   One of the problems of Casuarina was the absence of any reasonably available high school built on similar 'democratic' principles and this was clearly articulated by parents, teachers and children.

12   R Grille, 'Democracy Begins at School' (2003) (April) *Connect*, 5, 5.

13   For an international perspective on culture on the exercise of the right to participation, see a research collection of significant interest: S Cox, C Dyer, A Robinson-Pant, & M Schweisfurth (eds) *Children as Decision Makers in Education: Sharing Experiences across Cultures* (Continuum Publisher, 2010).

14   It incorporates the rules of the New South Wales Department for Education, Training and Communities Co-incidentally, it is noted that core values of the New South Wales Department of Education. Training and Communities include respect which may indicate a shift in the Department philosophy. There seems to be considerable flexibility in the implementation of these values at the school level and how they will work remains to be seen.

15   W Glasser, *Choice Theory in the Classroom*, (Harper Collins Publishers, 2001).

16   This could of course have been because there had been no call for this process to be invoked.

17   It is important to note that LillyPilly used one particular 'trainer' Terry O'Connell and he had helped them introduce their brand of restorative practice into the school. Casuarina's 'democracy' however was based more on the philosophies common to the democratic school movement worldwide. For example, it is largely modelled on Summerhill School in the UK.

18   V Hannon, 'Learning Innovation: Responding to the Global Imperative' (Paper presented at the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL)/Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM) Conference, Hosting and Harvesting, Sydney, Australia, 27 September 2010).

19   We were told that some work is also going into changing the culture of the SRC.

20   J Paquette, 'From Student to Citizen: A Community-Based Vision for Democracy' (2006) 16(2) *Education Law Journal* 219.

21   The extent of work that is being undertaken in this area provides a strong indication of an emerging shift in approaches to education which go beyond the traditional paradigm of school cultures.

22   J Arvanitakis & S Marren, *Putting the politics back into Politics: Young people and democracy in Australia: Discussion Paper,* (2009) Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney, 6. See also M Print, 'Citizenship Education and Youth Participation in Democracy' (2007) 55(3) *British Journal of Educational Studies* 325–345, 340.

23   In addition to the increasing amount of research in this area, set out above in this article, for an Australian trial, see P Blood & M Thorsborne, The Challenge of Culture Change Embedding Restorative Practice in Schools (Paper presented at the Sixth Annual Conference on Conferencing, Circles and other Restorative Practices, Building a Global Alliance for Restorative Practices and Family Empowerment, Sydney, Australia, 3 March 2005)