# Chapter 4
PARENT AND COMMUNITY "VOICE" IN SCHOOLS

This chapter investigates parental and community influence as exercised on running schools. Decentralisation is bringing decision-making closer to the local and school levels, but countries differ in the extent to which parents are regarded as partners or external to the school. The country evidence shows that formal opportunities of involvement are not necessarily translated into actual influence. Many parents complain that their views are sought only on practical issues. Parental engagement tends to decline as their children grow older and even some countries with high reported parental interest are finding declining involvement over time. Low involvement can reinforce the view on the education side that parents are external to school life. As in many organisations, the active parents are not necessarily representative of the parent body as a whole, with the less well educated and disadvantaged under-represented.

The most direct way in which demands can be expressed is not through "exit" and choosing an alternative but through the direct exercise of parental and community influence on the running of schools. This chapter examines the exercise of "outsider voice" in schooling, including what is reported by countries about how active parents are in running schools and how they are involved in the formal channels to participate in the decision-making process. It points to the reported shortcomings in the ways this form of voice is exercised, which may partly explain why exercising choice may often be seen as a more effective means of ensuring that schooling corresponds to demands. It is also the case that exercising voice can itself be highly demanding if that entails becoming closely involved in the running of schools – exercising choice periodically may well be a simpler alternative for many busy parents.

A useful introduction to the issue of voice is given by comparative figures on the extent to which decision-making is devolved to the school

level or whether the key decisions are made higher up. The general trend to decentralisation notwithstanding, Figure 4.1 shows that there is very wide variation between countries in the extent to which decision-making has become a local matter. England, New Zealand and especially the Netherlands are unusual in the very high proportion of decision-making now residing with schools, while others such as Greece, Australia, Mexico and Luxembourg still rely on the central education authorities for the majority of their decision-making.

Figure 4.1. Percentage of decisions relating to public sector lower secondary education, taken at each level of government (2003)
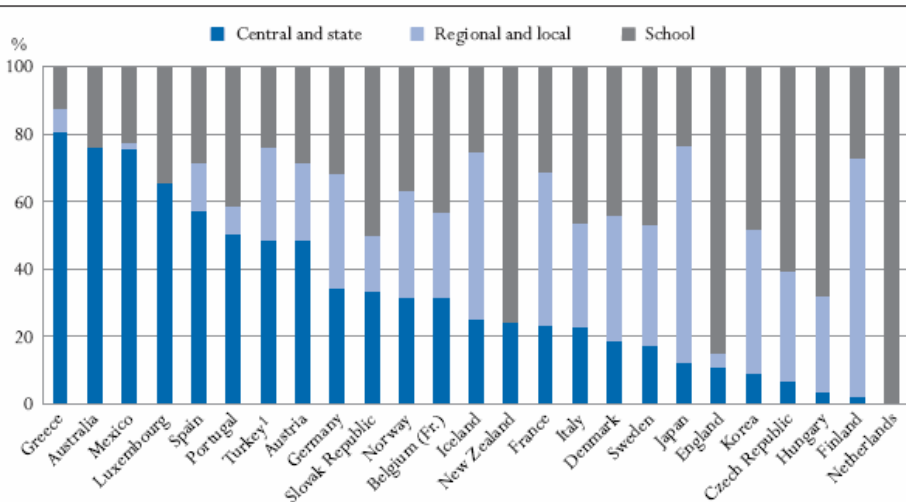
1. Turkish data refer to primary education only.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of decisions (on issues like organisation of instruction, personnel management and planning) taken at central and state levels of government. Example: In Greece, 80% of decisions are taken at the highest level of government (central and state), 7% at regional and local levels and 13% at the school level.

Source: *Education at a Glance – OECD Indicators 2004*, OECD, Paris, Table D6.1.

The formal exercise of parental voice in schools

The evidence from various countries raises interesting issues about how far parents want to exercise a role – and which role – in schools, and whether they feel that they have a "voice". Most countries have made

provisions for parents to receive information about schools. In the different countries surveyed for this study, provisions have been established for parents to participate in school decision-making. Some of these are rather formalised and refer to parent associations and parent councils, *i.e.* elected bodies of parents. School councils, on which elected parent representatives serve together with teacher representatives, are a more recent development in most countries. They tend to have more influence than parent associations and often have a say in developing local curricula, deciding about budgetary matters, and recruiting and selecting teachers and principals. However, there is a serious issue regarding how many parents are familiar with these arrangements and which parents these are, as well as the extent of involvement in formal procedures for governance.

A number of the country reports describe the formal changes towards extending parental powers or, as is the case in Denmark, where parents have long played an essential role in the running of schools, including the *folkeskolen*. In 1990, the parents' role in school decision-making was further strengthened with the creation of boards of school governors. Each board consists of five or seven parent representatives elected by all parents whose children are enrolled in the school. In addition, there are two representatives elected by and from among the school's employees and two student representatives, so that parents are in the majority. The board of governors develops the guidelines for a school's activities, approves the school budget and decides curriculum and staffing matters. According to 2001 evidence described in the background report, Danish parents are very committed to their children's schooling and on average spend three hours a month at the school.

In England, there have been radical changes in the governance of schooling over the past 10-15 years, with enhanced powers at the centre combined with much greater autonomy of decision-making by schools themselves. Each maintained school has its own governing body representing a wide range of different individuals and interests. Governors, between 9 and 20 per school, are volunteers and elected or appointed depending on what stakeholder they represent. Parent governors are elected by parents, staff governors by staff members, and additional community governors are appointed by the governing body. Governors fulfil three essential functions: they are to provide a strategic view, act as critical friends, and ensure accountability. Governing boards are involved in decision-making in a wide range of areas. They manage the school budget, make curriculum decisions, and they report a school's examination results to parents and others. They are in charge of drawing up an action plan after an inspection. Governing boards also play a core role in staffing a school, dealing with new appointments, staff appraisal and grievances. Given the

very significant responsibilities now extended to parents and local communities in England through these governing bodies, it is useful to consider how well this "voluntary" form of governance actually works.

In Finland as elsewhere, the increasing significance of parents in school development is related to the strong trend towards decentralisation to the local level. The new Basic Education Act from 1999 requires schools to be developed in co-operation with parents. The fact that schools draw up their own curricula, guided by the broad framework of the National Core Curriculum, has also brought school operations closer to parents (Niemi, 2000). Forms of co-operation between home and school include parent-teacher meetings, school festivities, parents' meetings, discussion events and one-to-one discussions between individual teachers and parents. In common with Finland, decentralisation is a key aspect of the Polish situation. Increasing decentralisation during the 1990s resulted in growing parental interest in the quality of schooling. In response to problematic conditions in schools, parents began actively to shape educational policy by creating school councils and associations to collect funds for improving conditions in schools. Parent and student representatives on the School Council (Educational System Act 2000) can in theory exert considerable influence over schooling.

A framework for parent and student involvement has been in place in Austria since the 1970s and there was a move towards greater school autonomy in the 1980s. Parents in every class elect a parent representative and those parents elected vote for parent representatives delegated to a body consisting of teacher, parent and student representatives which is chaired by the principal. In Slovakia too, parents' associations are independent and voluntary bodies which provide the school with feedback about learning and teaching and in some cases supply the school with additional financial resources. Since 2000, elected school boards consisting of parents and other community representatives control the management of a school and the work of a school's employees. Parents are involved in the development of school profiles. Slovakian schools are now entitled to add classes to their curricula according to the interest of students, parents or the region. At present, more than 40% of the primary schools organise additional teaching of mathematics, sports or foreign languages, music or arts on the request of parents.

Spanish parents can participate in the steering and management of schools through parent associations. There are currently two parallel parent associations: the secular Spanish Confederation of Parent Associations (CEAPA) and the National Catholic Confederation of Parents (CONCAPA) representing mostly Catholic parents, especially those whose children attend Catholic private schools or *centros concertados*. This confessional parent

association has been politically influential, campaigning for the right of parents to select the education they consider appropriate for their children. About 65% of the parents of students in primary education and 58% of the parents of students in secondary education are fee-paying members of one of the parent associations.

In Japan, recent policy initiatives have focused on greater parent and community involvement in school management. The newly introduced "school councillor system", which can be established by local education boards at their discretion, aims to promote the co-operation of community residents and parents in the life of the school and to make the plans and achievements of the school management accessible to a wider public in order to create stronger accountability. School counsellors also contribute to external evaluation and quality development. In addition, Japan has created provisions for the establishment of so-called community schools, which are sensitive to local needs and co-managed by community representatives who recruit the school principal through an open-application system.

A further possible way in which parental voice can be exercised in school life is through the use of surveys of opinion. Since the second half of the 1990s, for instance, many Hungarian schools have begun to conduct parental surveys as part of quality assurance systems of schools (Györgyi and Török, 2002). Parents – and in many cases students – are asked about their views on the school. The needs and satisfaction of parents and students are monitored more or less regularly in the 20% of schools where a quality assurance system is introduced. So far, however, survey results are only used informally and receive only restricted publicity.

Decentralisation is the natural context for the discussion of enhancing parental and community voice in school decision-making but it is far from synonymous with it. Consistent with the patterns in Figure 4.1 decentralisation may simply be about shifting the locus of decision-making and administration from one government level to another. Even enhanced school-level powers do not automatically mean that the "external" voice will be listened to. On the positive side, even if parents do not have voice, decentralisation facilitates diversity and in doing that may facilitate choice as an alternative way to make the system more demand-led. Focusing on formally recognising parents in decision-making, the brief overview of developments below shows that the results are mixed, going further in some countries than others.

Perceptions, patterns and problems regarding parental involvement in school governance

There are some positive reports from parents in the country cases regarding the opportunities to participate in school life. The majority of parents in England felt either "very involved" (38%) or "fairly involved" (51%) in their children's education (Moon and Ivins, 2004). Women were more likely to feel involved than men. In a survey on parental involvement in education, Williams, Williams and Ullman (2002) found that nearly 30% of parents felt "very involved" in their children's school life and another 56% "fairly involved". The main reported barrier to involvement was work commitments (cited by 53% and 33%, respectively). Other factors were child-care difficulties and lack of time. Three-quarters of parents (Williams, Williams and Ullman, 2002) said that they would welcome greater involvement. About a fifth of parents reported having helped out in class at some point (28% in primary schools and 12% in secondary schools). Other types of involvement included fund-raising and special interests, such as sports and drama.

In a 1998 Austrian study by Eder, parents were asked to report about and to assess their experience in the interaction with schools and teachers. Almost all forms of interaction concerning organisation of events and projects were assessed positively, and also experience regarding problems relating to achievement and to health and related issues. Only one issue, scheduling, was reported with negative examples only. Research conducted in Finland suggested that parents' attitudes towards co-operation with schools were positive. In a survey carried out by the National Board of Education (Apajalahti and Merimaa, 1996), almost all primary school rectors reported that parents had participated in preparation of the curriculum. About 70% of schools had provided parents with an opportunity to participate in setting objectives for students and in student assessment.

Despite these positive perceptions, however, the country reports indicate that there are problems with parental engagement in school life. Partly, this is about the actual level of engagement. There is declining involvement the higher the level of schooling and age of the students. In Finland, for instance, when students move to the lower secondary level, co-operation between home and school often fades away, despite both parents' and schools' wishes to the contrary (Virtanen and Onnismaa, 2003). In Hungary, active parent involvement is strongest at the initial stage of schooling and in alternative schools (Golnhofer, 2001). Parents of primary school age children in England are more likely to feel involved than those of secondary, and mothers more than fathers (Moon and Ivins, 2004). Despite the strong membership of parental associations in Spain, the great majority of parents

do not actively participate in the association's work. According to a 2002 survey (INCE), in primary schools only about a quarter of the parents become actively involved in school issues; in secondary education the proportion is even lower at 15%. Membership of parent associations is higher among parents of children in private schools than of those in public schools, but surprisingly the proportion of those parents who become actively involved in school issues is slightly lower in private schools.

Through-time trends may also be worrying for expectations of high parental engagement, and remove any simple thesis of a secular trend towards greater stakeholder participation. Some reports refer to the possibility that active participation is actually falling over time, even when the interest is there. In spite of the high level of interest that Danish parents take in their children's schooling, for instance, participation in school boards is in decline. The turnout in the elections to school governing boards has fallen consistently from 43% in 1990 to 31% in 2001. The proportion of contested elections has gone down from 43% to 14%, and only one in four board members stand for re-election for a new term. It remains to be analysed whether declining involvement leads to declining influence, or whether involvement is declining because influence is limited. In Spain too, according to the national report, some parents even question the real purpose of school councils and the level of parents taking part in school council elections is low with a decreasing tendency in recent years.

There may be perceived problems even when parental participation has gone up. In Finland, for instance, a report by the National Board of Education on the development of student assessment stated that primary schools had experienced an increase in co-operation between home and school and in parents' active involvement (Apajalahti and Merimaa, 1996). But it also highlighted another problem: teachers did not feel that they had received enough training to facilitate that co-operation. Even in this case, there seem to be significant problems: Niemi and Tirri (1997) found that, according to both teachers and teacher trainers, co-operation with parents was among the ten most poorly achieved objectives. Parents in Finland also complain that responsibility for the activities had been left to just a few parents (Siniharju, 2003).

This judgement about the role played by relatively few parents is far from unique to Finland, including in some of those countries reporting positive findings. Data from Austria, for example, show that with regards to access to information, participation and decision-making, there seems to be a marked difference between parents' representatives and the broader body of parents. While parent representatives feel well informed and respected by the school, Eder *et al*. (2002) found tensions in the relations between the wider group of parents and the schools.

Across all countries, there are the familiar equity issues regarding *who* is most likely to be those exercising their "voice" in the affairs of the school, especially in the more fundamental issues concerning school educational policy. Women are more likely to perceive themselves to be involved in their children's schooling than men. A study by Metso (2004) in Finland suggests that co-operation between home and school was more active at those schools where students' parents had a higher level of education. This study shows that the parent dealing with the school was usually the mother. According to the English research review by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003), the extent and form of parental involvement is strongly influenced by family social class, maternal level of education, poverty, maternal psycho-social health and single parent status and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity. This is complemented by a report by Ofsted, the English school inspection agency (2002), which reached the important if unsurprising conclusion that governing bodies were found to be more effective in areas of socio-economic advantage. In Hungary, poorer parents stay away from school meetings, and one reason suggested is so as to avoid having to contribute finances for extra-curricular programmes. Communication between schools and Roma parents is a particularly severe problem (Liskó, 2001), with one-fifth of Roma parents having no contact to the schools their children attend at all. Immigrant parents in Spain participate at a comparatively lower rate which is according to a report by the Spanish Ombudsman (2003) due to a lack of language skills rather than – as many teachers suggest – a low level of interest in their children's schooling or a low educational level.

These are issues about the gap between activists and the rest, which are found in general in social organisations as well as the equity issues about *who* tends to concentrate among the activists. There is also a gap between the structures that could in principle exist for parental participation and the extent to which they actually exist – a problem of implementation. Although the authority of the school board has been continuously expanded in Hungary very few schools have effective school boards in place. Despite a legal provision calling for their creation, school councils do not yet exist in most Polish schools because parents themselves would have to take the initiative of founding them. School councils can be created by a motion from at least two of the three democratic bodies functioning at a school – teachers', students' or parents' councils. But the national study reports that school councils only exist in one in ten Polish school and indeed many of them have stopped working, usually because of representatives of teachers' councils withdrawing, often under pressure from principals. Where the school council does not exist, its duties tend to be performed by teachers' councils. Even in Finland not all educational institutions which may have a board actually do so: according to a government survey, just over half the

schools providing basic education or general upper secondary education do not have one.

There are thus some problems apparent concerning how parental participation – through which demand may be expressed – works in practice including: declining engagement in higher levels of schooling, the gaps between the activist parents and others, the lack of preparation of teachers to engage with parents and others, and even lack of structures themselves (the gap between the theoretical possibility to exercise influence and actual practice). To look behind these problems, there is a set of factors which may represent a "vicious circle" in some countries and settings – the combination of low interest from too many parents and the limits to the voice that schools are willing to extend to parents. These are partly matters about legal frameworks, but more especially they are about cultures of co-operation. Switching to more demand-led schooling is much more easily said than done.

Low parental interest and lack of influence over fundamentals – a vicious circle?

Parents in some countries believe that the issues on which their engagement is sought are the relatively simple, practical ones rather than fundamentals about the school and education. Some of the reports suggest that the level of interest of parents, in both practical matters and fundamentals, is low, compounded by possible active discouragement by the school. There is reference to the worrying possibility that some parents are discouraged by the perception that their children may be put into a vulnerable position if they take a critical stance on matters of school policy. The more that these observations are true, the less can it be said that demand finds a direct expression at school level through voice as opposed to the indirect expression which comes from choice mechanisms in the educational "market place". Even if parents are involved but it is on the minor matters regarding school events and local fund-raising, this is scarcely evidence about exercising a say which is tantamount to shaping "demand". It is more accurately seen as participating in ensuring the supply.

These limitations to voice can be seen in sharp relief in the developments of Central and Eastern Europe. It may well be that the long experience with "supply-dominated" systems has engendered a culture which discourages parental involvement. In Hungary, only about one third (36%) of the parents said that they had a good or a very good influence on pre-school or school education while the majority said that they could hardly influence the education of their children because schools do not involve them (Gallup, 1999). More educated parents articulate their needs better,

they have a more critical attitude towards education. Similarly, in the Czech Republic, the new obligation to establish school councils with equal representation of local administration, parents and education staff has run into difficulties of implementation because of the low interest among the parents. In the case of Slovakia, the number of parents wanted to be directly involved in the management of the school is "negligible". Relatively few parents claimed their right to participate in the selection and evaluation of teachers, decision-making on what lessons the child would be taught at school, co-decision-making on the development of school system in the area of their residence, to participate in the teaching lesson and decide on the broad focus of the teaching.

Polish findings show both the relatively limited range of issues which engage parents and the low overall levels of engagement. In Poland, 20% of parents in rural areas and 15% of parents in cities held some function on a school's council or a parents' council. Half of those "active" parents call for more rights to exercise influence on schools. But, most Polish parents are interested in issues that seem to be limited directly to their own children's education. One survey (CBOS, 2000) indicated the current priorities and interests of Polish parents to be: setting the level of a yearly paid voluntary contribution to school (92%), organising school trips and other events (91%), solving difficult educational problems with individual students (85%), influencing schools' important financial decisions (77%), organising extra and additional classes (76%), creating the school's pedagogical programme, and influencing the choice of educational methods (65%). Some schools, most of them private, allow the educational programme to be developed co-operatively by the different bodies functioning at school but the level of parents' involvement is still rather low: (Polish Ministry of Education, 2001) 76% of primary schools and 80% of *gimnazja* studied parents' expectations before creating their school programme but only 25% of parents say that they were actively involved in the process of creating the programmes. A lack of procedures for democratic election and organisation of parent representative bodies and the strong political influence of local politicians and authorities over schools are seen as major obstacles to parental participation.

According to a 2000 survey in Denmark, parental influence on the content of teaching is limited to helping to shape the schools' social culture, including the social rules of the school. Thus, despite the long tradition of fostering school-home co-operation, Danish parents still have no particular influence on the content of teaching. However, the findings seem to indicate that they generally do not want it either. A survey conducted in Austria (Eder, 1998) is also not sanguine about untapped parental demand for greater involvement. It revealed that less than half of the parents in Austria

want to have a say in matters of schooling. Currently, 30% of the parents say that they are "strongly involved" in matters of schooling, 20% are "clearly not involved". The 1999 Education Monitoring (IFES, 1999, p. 52) claims that 40% of parents want to have greater influence on school decision-making. According to Eder's 1998 survey only between 20% and 33% of parents want to be involved in school decisions, but only some issues – like developing the school profile, deciding about school events and about sanctions – are of interest to them. Very few parents want to be involved in the selection and assessment of teachers and principals. More recent research by Eder *et al.* (2002) suggests that parents feel that their opinions about schooling and teaching are not taken very seriously by teachers and that critical feedback to the school might have negative consequences for their children.

Spanish legislation from the 1980s laid down parents' and students' right to participate in the control and management of schools through the School Council chaired by the school principal. In theory, School Councils are involved in formulating a wide range of issues on the school's agenda: its pedagogic programme, the development of rules and regulations, adopting and assessing curriculum and extra-curricular activities, monitoring academic performance, and any further development of the school's infrastructure. In reality, however, many parents feel that the agendas in School Councils are largely set and dominated by teachers and that parental scope for decision-making is limited to minor issues such as the organisation of school events and largely excludes key areas of schooling such as the content of the curriculum and the evaluation of school effectiveness. The Spanish country report laments a general lack of communication between parents and schools and a lack of information about the potential role of school councils among parents.

Hence, the problems clearly go well beyond questions of parental apathy or their busy lives, and relate also to how welcome they feel as partners in the educational enterprise. Many teachers in Hungary still disapprove of the fact that an "external actor" (the parent) has a say in school life. Similar to the case of Austria, some parents fear negative consequences for their children when expressing their opinions about a school. Parent-teacher associations which have been in place for decades are mostly seen as service organisations to the school, to help in organising school events and trips; most teachers regard the parents in these associations as assistants rather than stakeholders.

Since the late 1990s, each educational institution in Hungary has been obliged to develop and implement its own educational programme, including an analysis of the school's situation, curriculum guidelines and the school curriculum. Slightly more than 60% of the local school boards

entitled to approve the educational programmes said that there had been discussions with school principals concerning the content of the educational programmes. According to a national school principals' survey, parents and students are hardly involved in defining the content of education. More than 50% of schools involved parents in the analysis of situation by asking them to give their opinions but less than 10% provided opportunity for parents to contribute to the development of the educational programme, lesson schedules and curricula. In recent legislation, Czech schools are now obliged to develop a school curriculum decided upon by their school councils, but we have noted how problematic councils have been to set up. Where councils exist, a third of the council members will be representatives of the founding body, normally the municipal self-governing authority, one third representing parents and senior students, and a third for teachers. It is expected that this will lead to more public influence over the content and methods of schooling.

This section raises as many questions as it answers concerning the existence or not of a "vicious circle" between low parental interest, on the one hand, and unwelcoming or "unbending" schools, on the other; in any case, this will not be a constant across systems and communities. However, the evidence paints a picture of problems and pitfalls to be overcome. Even in the countries with some positive indications from the evidence (Denmark, England, Finland), there is little to suggest that an opposite "virtuous circle" is in place. And, even where home-school cooperation is the rule, the question still arises as to whether this is primarily as a vehicle to express parental demand(s) or else to assist the functioning of the school – to assist rather than to influence or actively to change.

Exercising broader stakeholder voice and the curriculum

In many countries, education is being decentralised with the aim *inter alia* of creating more local stakeholder influence on schools. A balance is being sought between some form of national curriculum and local freedom in creating the curriculum. There is no straightforward relationship between the degree of centralisation and room for stakeholder influence – even if a curriculum is centrally designed, consultative processes may give stakeholders a chance to exercise voice; where there is decentralisation in practice the role of stakeholders in the creation of a curriculum may be limited. There is a range of practice from the country reports which sheds light on other forms of parental and stakeholder "voice" beyond formal involvement in school governance.

For instance, several forms of consultation are normally used to aid the development of the National Curriculum in place in England since 1988.

This curriculum sets out a statutory entitlement to learning for all students – it determines what will be taught, sets attainment targets for learning, and determines how performance will be assessed. The consultation includes advisory groups, public consultation and focus groups. In 1997, for example, the central Department set up an advisory group to advise the government on the aims and purposes of citizenship education. Membership of the advisory group included teachers, lecturers, politicians, representatives of voluntary organisations and others. Groups consulted during the enquiry included schools, voluntary organisations, charitable foundations, church organisations, trade unions, local authorities, universities, government agencies and departments, organisations in other countries and individuals. Recently, there have also been attempts at listening to students "as educational experts".

In Finland, the National Board of Education decides on the national core curricula for pre-school education, basic education and upper secondary education and on the national requirements of competence-based qualifications. The national core curricula include the objectives and core contents of different subjects, as well as assessment principles. The local education authorities and the schools themselves draw up their own curricula within the framework of the national core curriculum. Parents and representatives of the professional community are involved in the design of local curricula. Vocational institutions establish local networks to become involved in regional business life. Local providers have opportunities to decide on the ways in which co-operation with parents and representatives of the local community is to be implemented. Parents also take advantage of this opportunity, though it is difficult to estimate the precise extent of their opportunities to influence the preparation of curricula.

A number of stakeholders is involved in the development of new curricula in Austria which requires a highly formalised process, including the social partners and the parents' and students' representative bodies. The process is mainly run by a selected group of subject experts, administration and teachers. Regulations about school autonomy have given more discretion to schools, which can now involve community partners in decision-making. Danish legislation stipulates minimum numbers of lessons for school subjects and the framework for a number of optional subjects as well as the central knowledge and proficiency areas that apply to the subjects. Municipalities have, for a number of years, had the opportunity to prepare local curricula but only very few municipalities have taken this opportunity. Recently, there has been a trend for increased central control to ensure increased focus on academic performance at *folkeskolen*. In 2002, threshold targets were introduced for years 2 and 7, as well as final goals for years 9 and 10. The Hungarian example also shows that in spite of a

decentralisation of developing educational profiles and contents, the formal role of parents, students and employers may still remain limited. Only about 20% of vocational training schools in Hungary discuss curricular issues and requirements with employers and chambers. Likewise in the Czech Republic, the curriculum for basic education has been developed by independent teams of experts and by experienced teachers. The contribution of groups representing civil society and parents was small. Even teachers, with the exception of active teachers associations focusing on reform, were not particularly involved.

In the United States, recent developments seem to go against the current in the other countries (Plank, 2005, p. 11). Efforts made in the past years to raise standards, equalise opportunities and strengthen accountability have reduced the scope for local decision-making in education. The increased importance assigned to standardised assessment, for example, has resulted in a steady standardisation of curricula. By and large, schooling has moved from being a local issue to becoming a battleground on which larger political battles are staged. This development has had major implications for the role of local stakeholders. Parents who might once have voiced their concerns at a local school board meeting must now enter a larger political stage.

General discussion

The general tendency is to give more discretion to local authorities as well as parents and other stakeholders of schools at the local level. Most countries recognise the diversity of demand and have created mechanisms allowing the "clients" of education, to express their interests with regard to the provision and the structure of schooling. When changes are examined on the basis of detailed examples, however, the notion of the shift to "demand-led" schooling is complex and problematic. The material reviewed in this chapter does not allow us to arrive at any clear-cut conclusions but it does suggest that the complexities arise from both the parental and the school sides of the equation.

At the school level, most systems have sought to become more participatory, with formal opportunities for parents to raise their voice and influence schooling. A broad trend has been towards a combination of more autonomous schools and increased stakeholder – most importantly parental – participation in decision-making. But this has gone hand-in-hand with more intensive steering from the centre in some cases, showing that there is no simple relationship between governance and influence. Moreover, the formal opportunities are neither always implemented nor necessarily translated into actual influence. Various reasons were mentioned in this

chapter. Parents are not always aware of the possibilities they have to influence schools. In some countries establishing a formal body for different stakeholders to help run schools requires initiative which is not always acted on. Another barrier is the fear that if they raise critical issues about schooling this might negatively affect their child. Parents' lifestyles and work lives may militate against intensive involvement, but there may also be many parents who are simply not interested.

The chapter has discussed a possible "vicious circle", where low parental involvement reinforces negative views from the education side that parents and the community should have only a very limited say in what goes inside schools. This is clearly a subject that could very usefully be illuminated through further research. It would be very useful to more accurately ascertain how far there is genuine interest or its lack among parents in being closely involved in decision-making at school level, on which issues, and how open to change this is if they perceive greater opportunities to exercise voice. Similarly, it would be very useful to clarify how open are the doors of schools – wide and welcoming or simply just ajar? Research can also usefully help to clarify the costs that come with wider participation and not only the benefits.

There are practical questions concerning how to create more effective parental participation. Removing barriers is important: at the most basic level this means that that all parents are informed about their rights and opportunities to have a say. School leader and teacher professional development may be needed. It may be possible to find alternative ways to consult parental opinions. Organising regular surveys or consultations at the national, regional or local level in which parents are asked about a number of major issues is another possibility. It will however be important to ensure that such consultation is genuine rather than cosmetic, for if there is widespread consultation with no impact on provision or the system it might reinforce cynicism, not participation. We have already observed in Chapter 2 that the knowledge base concerning attitudes and expectations tends to be weak; even where it is more robust, there is no simple relation between the findings and the decision-making process.

The broader context of governance is important here. The greater the decentralisation which enhances school-level autonomy without a concomitant increase in local participation the more worrying is the possibility of a "democratic gap". This is the accountability argument for parental involvement. When the state takes full responsibility the minister is directly answerable to Parliament. This direct responsibility is weakened with decentralisation especially as it extends to the school level (Figure 4.1 illustrates how important this is in some countries). How far this is perceived to be an issue of democracy in turn relates to how schooling is

itself regarded, legally and culturally, in any country. How far is local decision-making regarded as a matter of effective administration rather than a subject for the legitimate exercise of local democracy? How far does the notion of "demand-sensitive" or even "demand-led" enjoy any currency in a system? Or, are the checks and balances operated in other ways, such as through central authorities retaining firm guideline powers or inspection or through the "marketplace" of choice mechanisms?

The limited parental participation in school decision-making is compounded by the fact that the parents who do participate are not representative of the parent body as a whole. The fact that parents with certain backgrounds (white, middle class, higher educated) tend to be over-represented among the activists becomes more of a problem the more that their decisions serve limited self-interests rather than those of the whole student body. If, on the other hand, the skewed social representation does not significantly alter the direction of parental voice, it might better be viewed as an imperfection rather than a major flaw. The point to be underlined here is that while there are well-rehearsed arguments about the equity risks of enhancing the role of parental choice, enhancing voice is not free from the same concerns.

This is an issue which arises as much at the centre of the system in the consultation which takes place over curriculum and assessment issues as it does on the ground. Do the representatives of the middle-class viewpoint tend to favour choices and priorities based on the traditional academic values, which may serve neither their own children well nor those from other backgrounds? We have also seen in the previous chapter the importance of the effective organisation of voice to raise its "volume" for specific interests and parents. Again, the social differences in the way this is exercised might be the price to be paid for greater democratic participation in education but voice has as much a social dimension as does choice.

We return thus to the question of demand. This chapter has focused on parental, and to some extent community, voice as a key route through which demands may be expressed. The shortcomings in the arrangements for parental participation in governance are an alert to the fact that such expression is by no means assured. We have also noted that education systems differ fundamentally in the extent to which they aim to be more "demand-driven". They differ in the extent to which schooling is regarded as a crucible for local democratic politics as opposed to national decisions and values. But we have also seen that parental participation in education is not always about making their "demands" heard – involvement is not always about voice. Often it is to be more informed about their child's progress and to assist in the learning process. It is often to help ensure the effective functioning of the school as an institution, being part of the "supply" not just

"demand". On many questions parents may want to leave it to the professionals, not as a matter of apathy but as one of trust.

Hence, the role demand plays and the extent to which it finds active expression in school provision is not determined by the fact of parental involvement in the life of the school. It is also about how far genuine "partnership" (OECD, 1997) is in place. It is about whether the dynamics of education systems are essentially closed and self-determined or instead open to external influence. While there are risks involved in any changes, it seems likely that the long-term trend is towards greater openness. Education systems which embrace this are likely to find themselves with greater influence through partnerships rather than be overtaken by voices and choices which discard the views of the professionals.

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