Chapter 5
WHAT DO THE STUDENTS SAY?

This chapter examines students' perceptions and expectations of schooling, albeit on the sketchy evidence base in most countries. Schooling is seen as important for its social aspects, learning and getting ahead in life. In many countries there is overall satisfaction, though complaints tend to focus on the relevance and interest of courses. These complaints grow as students get older. Girls tend to be more ambitious and readier to face challenge than boys. High expectations are correlated with geographic residence, socio-economic status, and parental education attainment, especially the mother's. On choice, the chapter mentions some information from secondary education on the room to choose between different subjects around the compulsory core school curriculum. It also looks at exit behaviour through absenteeism. The opportunities for students to exercise their voice are in general limited and not always seen as effective. Students tend to regard being listened to and engaged in their lessons as the more important aspect of voice.

Demand critically involves the students themselves. If they are saying that what school has to offer means little or nothing to them, then it would be hard to claim that it is "demand-led". At the same time, it is a moot question how far students know what they want and are able to exercise mature judgement. How far is or should what students say they need be something different from their parents' wishes? How far should the individual projects of learners and their families be the guide as opposed to the broader collective projects of countries and communities which may not appeal to particular individuals? These are some of the questions now raised acutely by the aim of "personalising" education as mentioned in Chapter 1 (see OECD, 2006a).

This chapter does not examine "student demand" in the sense of "participation" which is how the term is often used to refer to the greater

number or fewer of a generation staying on in education or choosing a particular track. Instead, we cover what young people are saying they want from education, how they experience it, and how those attitudes and expectations are patterned variables, including by gender and social background. These questions in turn raise others for policy about how much intelligence there is in education systems in terms of knowing what young people report on these matters. We begin with an overview of the international picture and discussion of expectations (where data are not extensive), before turning to student satisfaction and their positive or negative judgements about schooling where data are relatively rich. We then explore – in parallel with the chapters on parents – the notion of student voice in schools.

The broad international picture

All education systems aspire not just to transmit subject knowledge but also to prepare students for life in general. The views of the majority of 15-year-olds suggest that education systems are quite successful in this respect. Typically, students in the OECD countries agree that school helped give them confidence to make decisions and has taught them things which could be useful in a job. Nevertheless, a significant minority of students, 8% on average across OECD countries consider school a waste of time. An average of 32%, and above 40% in Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Mexico and Turkey, report that school has done little to prepare them for life. In many countries, students' attitudes towards school vary greatly from one school to another, suggesting that school policy and practice can be influential in addressing this problem (PISA 2003, first results). Such findings are arresting and, when particularly negative, disturbing. But as we suggest below it is not straightforward for students still in school to give a rounded appreciation of how the experience will have benefited them at a later time.

Less problematic are student reports about how they experience school. In general, they report a positive sense of belonging at school. On average across OECD countries, 81% of the students agree that their school is a place where they feel like they belong. Eighty-nine per cent agree that their school is a place where they make friends easily. The overall figures do not support the thesis of a majority of teenage students feeling disgruntled and disaffected, even if they make up a significant minority in some countries (PISA 2003). Figure 5.1 has two dimensions – sense of belonging and attendance level. It shows just how wide are the variations between countries. The OECD countries that stand out as those where the sense of belonging is lowest at over 30% or more are Poland, the Czech Republic,

France, Belgium, Korea and Japan, especially Poland and Korea at over 40%. Countries where low belonging is lowest are Sweden, Ireland, Hungary, and the United Kingdom at below 20%. It also shows that there is no clear relationship between participation in school and a sense of belonging, with some of the countries where reported engagement is lowest enjoying among the highest participation levels (notably Korea and Japan). ("Sense of belonging" is based on students' responses to six items describing their personal feelings about being accepted by their peers and whether or not they felt lonely, "like an outsider" or "out of place". The second component is "participation", which is measured by the frequency of absence, class-skipping and late arrival at school during the two weeks prior to the survey.)[1]

These wide variations among countries found in the PISA data of 2000 are confirmed by the PISA data gathered in 2003: students in Austria, Germany, Iceland, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland report the highest sense of belonging at school. In contrast, the lowest sense of belonging at school is reported by students in Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Japan, Korea, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Turkey. For example, while in Sweden 5% of students report that school is a place where they feel awkward and out of place, more than three times this proportion report that feeling in Belgium and Japan (PISA 2003, first results).

That there are countries notable for having a low sense of belonging, while high attendance and indeed high achievement, indicates that there are complex relationships between the perceptions of young people, social pressures to participate, and the ingredients of academic success. It would be particularly useful to focus especially on the countries which manage the combination of high belonging, high attendance and engagement, and high achievement at the same time. The dimension of how schooling is experienced by young people is an important additional element to that on achievement levels alone.

Another country noted for its high achievement, Finland, does not differ essentially from the OECD average on the indicators of engagement and participation, as confirmed in Figure 5.1. But, in most OECD countries, the

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[1] Sense of belonging and participation: There are two issues concerning the validity of participation measures that warrant discussion. One is that the measure of participation could be more extensive, what was measured in this study is narrowly focused on student absenteeism. Part of the problem is that the very nature of school participation varies considerably among countries, making it difficult to measure participation with a broader focus that includes time spent on homework, participation in classroom discussions and involvement in sports and other extra-curricular activities. Second, the construct itself undoubtedly has a cultural component and thus varies among countries and among subgroups within countries.

likelihood of having a low sense of belonging and a low participation rate are clearly greater among students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In Finland these differences are small – social class influences attitudes less (OECD, 2003).

Figure 5.1. Prevalence of students with low sense of belonging and low participation
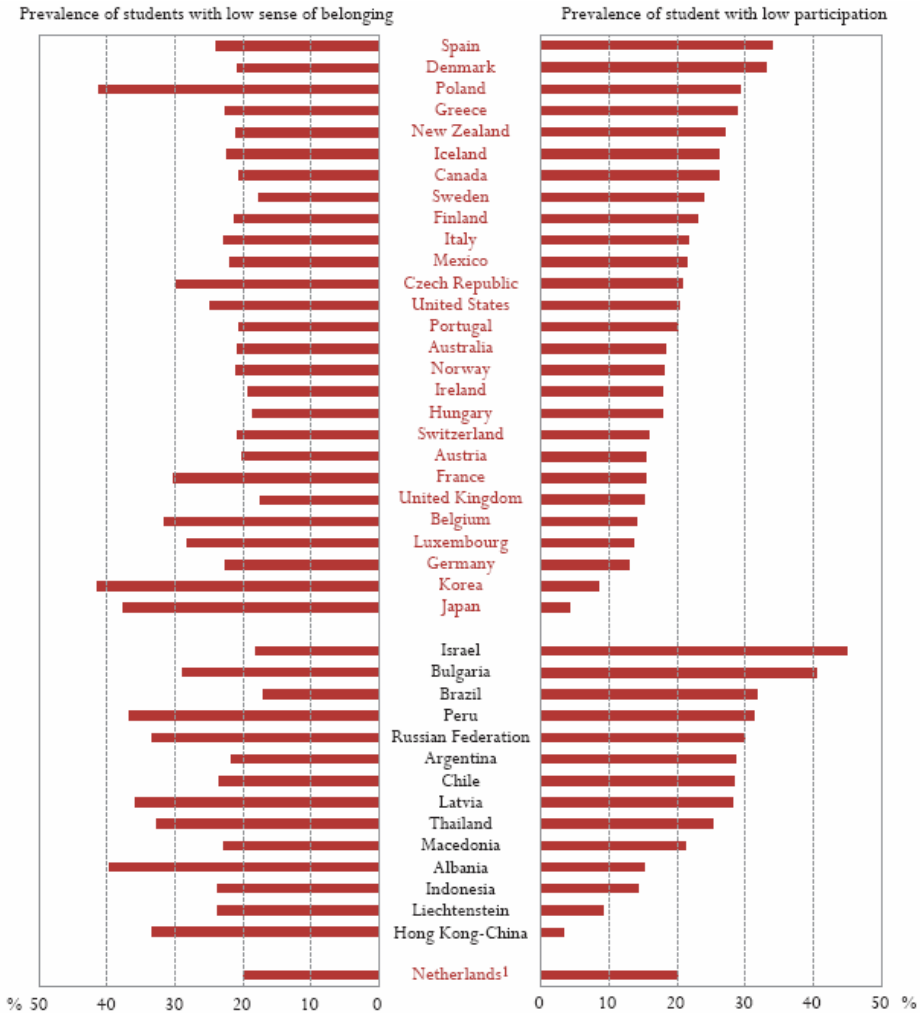
1. Response rate is too low to ensure comparability.

Source: OECD (2003).

What do young people expect from school and how satisfied are they?

What do the national case studies have to say about young people's attitudes towards schooling in terms of their expectations, aspirations and satisfaction? On expectations, some of the most insightful data are from Poland. *Gimnazjum* students have high expectations of their school, both about being well prepared for further education and about additional activities offered by schools to give them a chance for developing their interests, for entertainment and social contacts (Konarzewski, 2001). The aspirations are manifested in more seeking a longer education – more young people choose secondary schools after which they can continue education at higher level.

Research conducted from 1993 to 2002 on what motivates young people in Poland to study shows significant changes connected with the change of economic situation. In 1993 most of those questioned pointed to the possibility to get a well-paid job (66%). Less important were: independence and self-reliance (37%), easier life (36%), interesting job (36%), intellectual development and self-fulfilment (34%), and in sixth position there was avoiding unemployment (16%). By 2002, this last argument had gained ground among those questioned (46%), together with well-paid job (73%) and easier life (42%). Those who selected to get an interesting job did not change (36%), fewer of them chose independence and public respect and recognition as important motivating factors (13%) and the biggest decrease was observed at intellectual development and self-fulfilment (13%) (CBOS, 2002). The need of economic security became more important than gaining the non-material benefits of education. Economic ends play an important role in shaping the demands of young people, especially in changing circumstances where this value of education becomes reinforced.

During the decade covered by this research, the number of young people who believe that in 10 to 15 years' time they will be highly educated had more than doubled to nearly 60%, and at the same time a decreasing number of people plan to finish their education after the end of the upper secondary cycle. A large majority of general secondary school students are confident that they will get a university education (96%) and students of technical and profiled secondary schools think the same (78% and 77% respectively); around 20% increase in this respect since 1996. A 1990s UK review (Keys and Fernandes, 1993) noted that many students believe that an important purpose of school and education is to help to get a job or to set them on the path for their chosen career. Around 90% agreed or strongly agreed that schools should help them to do well in examinations, teach them things that would be useful when they got jobs, and to be independent. When asked the

question, "Thinking about the future, what are the most important ways your school could help you?", most of the students' responses are concerned with preparation for the future. The main issues mentioned were: the acquisition of life skills, such as self-discipline, motivation and independence; the provision of support and encouragement; the provision of knowledge about careers; the provision of high quality education; help in gaining qualifications for further study and help in gaining qualifications for employment.

Most young people in the United States aim to complete secondary school and enrol in post-secondary education. According to Public Agenda (1997, p. 11) "few see any alternative path to an acceptable future". The educational aspirations of African-American and Hispanic youngsters are not significantly different from those of whites; indeed, "black and Hispanic teenagers believe even more strongly than white teens in the advantages of a sound academic education" (*op. cit.*, p. 32). What seems to be underlined by this and the other examples is that student expectations – realistically perhaps – are very conventional. They do not necessarily share an equal emphasis on what is important as their parents. Among the 12- to 17-year-olds surveyed in Japan for the 16th World Youth Survey, for instance, while the items of "specialist knowledge" and "skills to be used in employment" are supported by 47% and 31% respectively of the parents as a main reason for going to school, they are less supported by students (18% and 15% respectively), while to gain an "educational record and qualification" is supported by both parents and students (42% and 37%). What young people are looking for, the emphases and nuances apart, is very similar to that sought by their parents and the wider public; perhaps this is a sign of how effectively schools socialise pupils with similar aspirations as the wider population.

But this is difficult terrain, conceptually and empirically. Students may give answers to those conducting surveys about their fundamental beliefs regarding the purposes of education, but more realistically they attend school because it is a convention and obligation for them to do so. How far is it realistic to expect that they will have a rounded, coherent appreciation of what education can give them in the future before it has happened, rather than afterwards? The notion of "expectations" could thus be more difficult to apply and interpret for those currently in school compared with those who have already completed it and moved on. This is not a reason to ignore the student voice on the grounds that it is immature but to focus especially on where student experience is direct and where perception is most likely to shape behaviour. In the next section, we look at what the study reports had to say concerning the patterns of school student aspiration and the more detailed evidence concerning satisfaction.

Patterns in educational aspirations and choices

Those most confident that they will attain a university degree are the young people living in cities and towns who describe their families' economic status as at least average. Girls tend to be more ambitious than boys. For the Czech Republic, the PISA data confirm higher female aspirations and show a strong link between parents' education and the socio-economic status of the family and students' aspirations. Over 70% of students who do not aspire to pass *maturita* have a mother who did not graduate, and around half of students with this low level of aspiration are students with the lowest socio-economic status who make up a quarter of the cohort (Straková *et al.*, 2002). Selective schools are attended by students with higher socio-economic and cultural capital who enjoy higher study aspirations. Students with average reading literacy from families with a lower social status who study at six- and eight-year *gymnázia* have far higher aspirations to study further than lower-level secondary students of the same age. An overwhelming majority of *gymnázia* students plan university education, but the same applies to only half those in secondary technical programmes with *maturita*. According to the 1999 IEA study on citizenship education, almost all students in the Czech Republic believe education is an important precondition for success in the labour market. Lower-level secondary school students are, however, far more sceptical – or more realistic – than *gymnázium* students as regards the prospects of self-fulfilment.

In a Hungarian survey of students' workloads (2002), every tenth student answered that the nearest school for them would be the best one, the others voted in equal proportions (45-45%) for where they feel best or where it is the easiest to continue studies. Background, however, makes a difference to the responses. In the higher grades of general secondary schools to continue to further education is the most important aspect for some 6 in 10 students, although half of vocational secondary school students also mentioned this as the most important aspect. Gender differences are also clear: boys prefer the easier, more convenient solutions while girls are more ambitious. The strongest is the link to parents' educational attainment: those coming from the most educated families chose the "further education" response two and a half times more than those coming from the least educated ones. In Hungary, for both rural and urban students the chances of further studies beyond secondary education increase with the level of school performance. More rural than urban youngsters with better school performance choose vocational training institutions; town children choose upper-level secondary school more than their village counterparts (Lannert, 2004).

Children of more educated parents choose universities not only due to greater material security but also because in these families the norm of further education is stronger. A survey conducted in 1999 with 17-year-old Hungarian students suggested that that there is no difference between the aspirations of weaker students by family income if the school attainment level of the mothers is the same. Further education aspirations differ more by the school attainment of the mother than by family income: material capital cannot be exchanged in a simple way for cultural capital.

Teenage school students make the connection between schooling, their level of education and future opportunities in the labour market. They see the necessity to get a good education in order to continue their education, go into higher education and successfully enter a labour market that is perceived to be ever more demanding. Young people living in urban areas tend to aim at the university level more often than those in rural areas. In this case, supply might be shaping demand: the fact that urban areas offer a better infrastructure for higher learning and a more diverse labour market will most likely create ambitions and provide role models for ongoing learning.

Students' satisfaction with schooling at different levels

The picture from the national data reported for this study confirms that of the international overview, while adding detail and different groups to the PISA 15-year-olds. They show that the overall satisfaction level with schooling is generally high across the countries studied, but there are differences between countries, and by level of schooling and the gender and background of the school students.

The majority of students in England appear to like school (Keys and Fernandes, 1993; NOP Consumer, 2003; Keele, 2004; MORI 2004). Keys and Fernandes found three-quarters or more of 11-year-olds and of 13-year-olds agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "On the whole, I like being at school". Students were even more likely to believe that their own school was a good school. According to the Austrian school monitoring survey, students' overall satisfaction with schools is similar to that of the wider population (IFES, 2003, pp. 9–11). A poll in Poland (SOURCE) found that 82% of primary school students said they liked their school and two-thirds said they had many friends (only 12% said they felt lonely at school), and 76% of students expressed positive opinions about their teachers. In Hungary one fifth of 7th-graders liked going to school very much and more than two-thirds of those surveyed had a positive attitude to going to school. Students' attitudes to school in Finland are positive regardless of the school subject (National Board of Education).

The situation in Japan is more complex for the PISA studies show them with a consistently low level of engagement and high participation while the Japan Youth Research Institute (2002) reported that nearly 8 in 10 are happy with their school life. Nevertheless, a high 38% of them feel that "school life presents a great challenge to them" and, despite their low actual absence, 65% of the students surveyed "want to be absent from school", 74% answer that they "want to skip lectures" and 72% "feel dissatisfied with the ways of the school they attend". Those who feel that they want to skip lectures or to stay away from school increased over the 20 years to 2002.

There are clear differences in reported satisfaction by age of school student in England. The Children and Young People Survey (NOP Consumer, 2003) reported that 87% of primary school students and 68% of secondary school students agreed that their school was "really good". NOP Consumer (2003) noted that the majority (over 80%) of primary school pupils said that they enjoyed being taught by their teachers, agreeing that they were always fair, listened carefully to them, were kind and caring, made them work hard and made lessons interesting. Similarly, Keele (2004) found that over 90% of primary school students reported liking their class teacher and that about two-thirds of secondary school students said they enjoyed being taught.

In the Czech Republic, 69% of the students in grade four said that they liked their school (IEA, 2003). This study also showed that positive attitudes to school are less frequent in higher years of compulsory schooling. Among 11-year-old students 24% do not feel happy at school, the same holds true for 34% of 13-year-olds and for as many as 41% of 15-year-olds (Provazníková *et al*., 2004). Concerning the level of satisfaction with the choice of a secondary school in 1999, 86% of secondary school students in the Czech Republic said that they were happy about their choice. Over half said they would choose the same school and programme again. *Gymnázium* students tend to be happier with their choice than students in secondary technical schools and secondary vocational schools. Many more *gymnázium* students also believe that their school is excellent (56% compared to 18% of secondary vocational students). An overwhelming majority of *gymnázium* students (97%) agree that the school provides them with relevant knowledge.

In the PISA surveys, about two-thirds of Austrian students say they are satisfied with their schooling environment. Vocational colleges are rated highest among Austrian students, schools accompanying apprenticeship training are rated lowest, academic secondary and vocational schools are rated at a similar level in between the two. The upper-level schools are rated positively in more dimensions than the lower-level ones. In the first year of upper secondary education in Hungary there are slightly more students who

like going to school than among those who are two years younger. Among general secondary school students there are twice as many students who like going to school than among vocational training schools students. Among vocational students those studying economics, commerce and ICT have a more positive attitude towards school than those studying in industrial or agricultural vocational secondary school and their attitude is even more positive than that of 4-grade general secondary schools students (Survey on students' workloads, 2002). Slovak Republic research (Beňo and Beňová, 1994) reported the students of secondary grammar schools like going to school much more than students at vocational schools. School is mostly liked by primary school pupils but 24% of them nevertheless say that they dislike school. Most students of vocational schools (40%) go to school without anxiety. On the whole, positive evaluations prevail over negative ones, even if in the Slovak Republic one student in four dislikes going to school, every fifth student attends with anxiety, and 15% of the students say that they attend school without any interest.

Spain is one of the countries where the general level of student satisfaction is lower than some of the other countries covered here, with only about 70% of Spanish students saying that they feel satisfied with their school (Ombudsman, 2003). This is especially apparent at the secondary level. Concerning students' perception of school functioning, in primary education, 82% of the students were satisfied in contrast with only 53% in secondary education. Only a very small minority – around 5% – expressed a high degree of dissatisfaction with learning in their school. The majority of students said that their teachers liked them very much, just 10% answered negatively. As might be expected, students in primary education expressed more agreement with their teachers and what they learn than secondary students.

In Finland, good learning outcomes are related to more positive attitudes, with the relationship stronger in the higher than in lower grades. Attitudes are more negative among older than among younger students but then they are more positive among students among the oldest ages in school who move on to upper secondary school compared with those continuing in vocational education and training. Attitudes among the small number of students who do not intend to apply for upper secondary education on completion of comprehensive school are the most negative of all. There is a very small group of students, even in Finland, whose attitudes towards school are very negative.

Gender and other population differences in reported satisfaction

In England as in other countries, girls are more likely than boys to like school and their teachers, enjoy schoolwork, and perceive their own school as a good one. They are less likely than boys to perceive schoolwork as boring (Keys, Harris and Fernandes, 1995; Keele, 2004; MORI, 2004). The assessment by girls of their school experience in Spain is also more positive than by boys (Ombudsman, 2003). PIRLS data (2001) in the Czech Republic suggest that while an already-high quarter of the girls (24%) do not like their school, this is much higher among the boys (38%). Other surveys confirm the higher percentage of boys who dislike school. A WHO survey on "Health Behaviour in School-Age Children" (1998) shows similar results for older students. When asked whether they like and feel good at school, over one third of the boys and one quarter of girls gave a negative answer. Gender differences vary stereotypically by subject area in Finland (National Board of Education) in that attitudes towards mother tongue, the second national language (either Finnish or Swedish) and foreign languages, geography and biology are more positive among girls than boys; boys on the other hand have more positive attitudes towards mathematics, physics and chemistry.

In Hungary, positive attitudes are also more prevalent among students who are more successful at school and those who come from more privileged backgrounds, with fewer who do not like going to school at all, with the opposite among Roma and other minority students and among boys. Students in Spain who attend schools with more than 30% of immigrant students are more satisfied with their school than those at schools with a lower proportion of immigrant children, a possibly unexpected result. Immigrant children express about the same level of satisfaction (71%) as non-immigrants. Eighty per cent of Spanish students stated that they were satisfied with the contents and the process of learning with again immigrants showing the same or even more pronounced approval (85%). In England, white students were more likely to think their school was good (MORI, 2004). The attitudes of immigrant and ethnic minority students in particular need further clarification.

In sum, in all the countries covered, student attitudes to schooling are generally positive, although older students are more critical about schooling than younger ones: primary school children are more satisfied than students in secondary schools, with those at the lower secondary level more than student on the upper level of secondary education. These findings are in line with international research on students' enjoyment of learning in schools which gradually decreases with age. Learning in primary schools is less overshadowed by the pressure to get good marks to be able to continue one's education or successfully enter the labour market. Education in

primary schools tends also to be more experiential, offering greater opportunities for students to follow their natural curiosity and be engaged in their own learning. In all the countries covered students in higher educational tracks tend to be more satisfied than students in vocational education.

Absenteeism – students voting with their feet?

Absenteeism is a more direct and extreme expression of student dissatisfaction and disengagement. Given the patterns of satisfaction, it is not surprising that absenteeism rises significantly between the primary and secondary levels. In England, the average rates of unauthorised absence are significantly higher in secondary than in primary schools. Only a minority of students take unauthorised absence. About 16% of primary students and 23% of secondary students had at least half a day's unauthorised absence in 2003/04. Such students missed, on average, eight half-days in primary schools and 15 half-days in secondary schools during the school year (DfES, 2004). About half the parents in England perceive bullying as a problem and just under half consider truancy levels to be problematic (Shaw, 2004). Studies by Keys and Fernandes (1993) and Keele (2004) found that younger students were slightly less likely than older students to admit their absences, and that girls were less likely to report that they did so (Keys, Harris and Fernandes, 1995). These two last findings seem to be consistent across countries and with the patterns of school satisfaction.

Over half of Danish students state that bullying takes place in their class but it does not seem to increase or decrease as students progress through school (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2004). In Poland, according to PISA data, 41% of the surveyed students said they had experienced the feeling of loneliness and isolation in school, and 29% admitted having arrived late and having played truant. Research on rates of absenteeism in compulsory schools shows that it is very much an age-related phenomenon. The average number of unexcused absences is one per primary school student and 13.2 per *gimnazjum* student (Konarzewski, 2001). The problem is bigger among rural than urban students.

In a 2002 survey (NHK), 17% of Japanese junior high school students and 25% of the senior high school students answered "often" or "sometimes" to the question "How often do you feel like not going to school?". In Japan, the number of absent students increases with age – especially between the first and second grade in junior high school, and between the first grade in junior high school and the 6th grade in elementary school. However, as we noted in Figure 5.1 there is a wide discrepancy in Japan between experiencing disengagement and lower participation. One in

every 275 elementary students (0.36%) and one in every 36 junior high school students (2.8%) are classified as long-term absentees, which is very low indeed even if it has risen rapidly in junior high schools in recent years. The following problems are seen as reasons for truancy: lack of self-esteem, increasing numbers of children who do not see they have any future prospect of vocation and profession, lack of motivation toward studying, and lack of a sense of obligation to have to go to school. In many cases, student absenteeism is explained by students not wanting to go to school because they fear being bullied.

In the United States (Plank, 2005), there is a substantial number of young people whose engagement in schooling falls short of publicly articulated norms and standards. Some of these young people remain enrolled in school, but are only weakly engaged in educational pursuits. Many others drop out of school before completing secondary education. This brings a variety of problems, both for the young people themselves and for the broader society, especially as drop-out is concentrated among young people from marginalised or disadvantaged groups, including urban students and members of racial and linguistic minorities. There are significant gender differences in educational performance and educational attainment, and these are increasing with time. Boys are significantly more likely than girls to drop out of school; young women are more likely than young men to enrol in post-secondary education and to complete post-secondary degrees. Gender differences are especially pronounced among African-American and Hispanic young people; for example, more than 60% of the bachelor's degrees awarded to African-Americans are awarded to women.

In each country, there is a minority of students whose attitudes to schooling are very negative, though as shown through the satisfaction data this minority can be a large one, including in some countries with high levels of attainment and achievements. The likelihood of truancy increases with the age of a student and is more common in the last years of secondary education. In all countries, female students like school better than males do, and absenteeism is significantly higher among boys. English evidence suggests that there might be some under-reporting among girls and younger pupils, where the source of data is self-report, which would amplify these differences.

Educational factors that students identify as shaping their attitudes

What do students say about schools which might lie behind their positive or negative attitudes? They do not have a one-dimensional understanding of what schooling is about and schools represent many different things to them: as places to learn, to meet friends, and to get

credentials to get ahead in life. Their expectations and attitudes are shaped by many factors beyond the formal provision of education. The reasons most cited by Japanese students for going to schools were "good friends". Among the 12- to 17-year-olds, 80% cited this as their main reason (l6[th] World Youth Survey). For students in the Slovak Republic, schoolmates are important for one third of students of secondary grammar schools, one fifth of students of specialised secondary school and a little less for students of the other schools. They are slightly more emphasised by boys than girls. "Good and friendly relationships among schoolmates and decent behaviour of the schoolmates" is also appreciated. As well as solidarity, friendship, openness, interest in the other gender, good team, the effort to help each other, possibility to speak openly about problems, being happy, having fun, having a chance of a good chat, no abuse of younger by the older, possibility to relax after a tough day at school. They like a good atmosphere, comfort, openness at school, resulting from, for example, interesting discussions with the teachers on various issues, good relationships among the students, mutual help, willingness of the schoolmates, feeling secure, substantially free, having free, informal discussions with the teachers, vividness, music and singing.

For students in Austria, the most important quality criteria from the students' perspective are the social competencies of teachers and the individualisation of teaching. Other very important criteria are modern instructional methods, technical equipment and a diverse range of subjects (IFES, 2003). Other English research indicates that students particularly appreciate teachers with good interpersonal skills and teaching ability (Morris *et al.*, 1999). In Denmark, an indication of what students would like at school is the charter of the national students' interest group. Schools should offer a good environment with teaching "that makes sense to students" and take responsibility for students' personal development, take individual students into account and provide "room for everyone", use evaluation methods to help each student improve his or her performance, provide students with an understanding of and commitment to democracy, facilitate co-operation between students, school and parents. During the 2002 meeting of the Danish Children's Council the children expressed four aims of schooling. In addition to friends and a good physical and mental environment, these were good teachers and alternative education methods. Environmental factors featured also in the list of complaints about school made by the Slovak school students, as they include the amount of sitting at school, lack of moving, air, physical activity and little leisure time as well as concerns about the teaching.

United States students participating in the Public Agenda survey (1997) identified a variety of obstacles to achieving their educational objectives,

including disruptive peers, low standards and expectations for student behaviour and performance, and bad teaching. The results display "a yearning for higher expectations and closer…monitoring by schools and teachers" (*op. cit.*, p. 23), reflecting the recognition even among young people themselves that they could accomplish far more in school than their teachers now require them to do. In Spain, according to survey results about adolescents' view of their last three months at school (CIS 2003), only 3.4% of the Spanish teenagers surveyed said that they were "bored" and 15% felt "stressed". According to a Hungarian study conducted by Aszmann *et al.* (2003), nearly one third of the 6 000 students asked find school difficult (35% of 5th-graders, 37% of 7th-graders, 40% of 9th-graders and 30% of 11th graders). Slightly higher is the proportion of students who are fatigued by school. The ratio of these students increases from grade to grade (in grade five this ratio is 37%, in grade nine 47%).

Some of the reasons given to MORI (2004) by young people in England who did not enjoy education suggest ways that schools do not meet their needs. Half of those who did not enjoy school said they would like lessons to be more interesting; nearly 40% would like more choice over the subjects they studied and over 20% would like more practical or vocational courses. These data might indicate that educational approaches to cater to individual student interest by personalising learning (OECD, 2006) have not sufficiently been applied in the schools examined. Morris *et al.* (1999) in their literature review concluded that aspects of work-related learning, especially work experience, were viewed positively but that students often criticised the content and delivery of the mainstream curriculum.

Keys and Fernandes report that, although 55-60% of 11- and 13-year-olds said they found their work interesting in all or most lessons, a minority (about 9%) perceived all or most of their lessons to be boring. The students taking part in the study by Keele (2004) were even less enthusiastic: though about 60% of 11- to 16-year-olds agreed that schoolwork was at least fairly interesting, about a third considered it to be boring; another study (NOP Consumer, 2003) found even higher levels at about a third of 7- to 11-year-olds and 44% of 11- to 16-year-olds agreeing that schoolwork was dull and boring. The majority of lower secondary school students in England reportedly appreciate the value and importance of schoolwork *per se*, however, even if they are less convinced by their own lessons. Keys and Fernandes found a large majority (over 90%) of 11- and 13-year-olds believing that schoolwork was worth doing; only a tiny 3% agreed or strongly agreed that the work in all or most lessons was a waste of time or that school itself was a waste of time. So such total rejection is rare, but several studies (for example, Keys and Fernandes, 1993; Keys, Harris and Fernandes, 1995; Keele, 2004) have identified a minority of around 10% of

students who hold consistently negative attitudes towards school and schoolwork.

This relates back to those singled out earlier in this chapter who "vote with their feet" to express dissatisfaction: the young people who are regularly absent from school. The most common reasons cited for truancy from school are boredom, problems with teachers, bullying and peer pressure. According to the 2000 PISA data on the Czech Republic, even students in the more demanding *gymnázia* say they were bored (about 50%) and a quarter did not want to go to school. This is surprising given that *gymnázia* as selective schools are regarded as better meeting the needs of talented and inquisitive children than lower-level secondary schools. When asked why they do not like their schools, 64% of primary Polish school students said that they were bored (The Social View of the Reform, 2000). Among *gimnazjum* students 23% described the level of boredom as higher than in primary school and 37% said it was at the same level (Konarzewski, 2001). English students who disliked school tended to consider schoolwork boring, unimportant and a waste of time, to dislike their teachers, and to behave badly in class (Keys and Fernandes, 1993). Disaffected students also tended to be less likely to have a positive academic self-image, to perceive their parents as supportive, and to hold positive views on the ethos of their school. In addition, Morris *et al*. (1999) in their literature review noted that poor relationships with teachers were often associated with disaffection, disruption and truancy, and to have a negative effect on attitudes towards staying on at school.

Morris *et al*. (1999) cite research reporting that absentees do not necessarily dislike school: of those involved, only about one third indicated that they disliked schools. However, those regularly absent often disliked their lessons – the desire to avoid a particular lesson was much more frequently given as a reason for truanting than a desire to avoid school. This might indicate that it is not the culture or climate of schools students want to "exit" but rather particular ways that learning is organised within the school. Most absentees (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003) said that the reason they wanted to miss school was boredom, and over half said they were not sorry afterwards. School-related reasons for truancy were thought to be more important than home-related factors by secondary school students and parents – they perceived the main causes of truancy to be bullying, problems with teachers and peer-pressure. Students also cited problems with lessons and social isolation.

With regard to the content and methods of teaching, young people express a preference for active, participatory learning and would like to see more opportunities to gain practical work experience. Teachers are most appreciated for good social and interpersonal skills and the ability to pay

attention to individual student's abilities, interests and needs. By the same token, there is a widespread viewpoint that school is "boring", or more particularly too many lessons are not interesting enough. Dislike of lessons, especially particular lessons or individual teachers, can mean that the disenchanted become more permanently disengaged. Given that the social aspects of schooling tend to be relatively positively appreciated by young people, this suggests that a great deal about engagement with school hinges on the quality of the in-school, classroom experience.

The expression of student voice

But what about students having a "voice" in order to express their demands as part of the educational process – this can also be seen as an important component of any school system that purports to be "demand-led"? This section both discusses the more generalised perception of having a "voice", and the more specific, formal opportunities for voices to be expressed. It does not add up to a picture of students clamouring for greater participation, even if this characterises an activist minority.

Findings from England on students' views on participation in the classroom are not very consistent. Clear majorities of students in England wanted parents and children to have at least some say over what is taught in schools – 87% and 74%, respectively (Park, Phillips and Johnson, 2004). Slightly more young people agreed than disagreed that students were too young when they had to choose subjects to specialise in (*ibid.*). Students frequently express a preference for active participatory learning. Evidence for students' preference for participatory learning was also found by Keys and Fernandes (1993), according to which lower secondary school students were more likely to say that they liked lessons where they were actively involved with others or where they made things than lessons where they worked alone.

Regarding individuality at Danish *folkeskolen*, the democracy survey (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2004) shows that: students widely feel that they can be themselves at school and 8 out of 10 feel that they are able to be themselves in class, so acquiring a foundation in democratic practice that is central to a liberal outlook. Students feel they have good opportunities to express their opinions: 8 out of 10 students think that they can do so even if they disagree with the teacher or other students in the class. The opportunities increase as they progress through school: 86% of students feel that there is a good feeling of class community and only 8% say they are not included; which is equivalent to 1-2 students per class. Three-quarters feel that they are good at working together in class. The students also indicate that discussion of disagreements makes a positive contribution to the discussion culture. A

survey (2002) of around 1 200 students from year 6 carried out by the Children's Council shows that only around 20% of students are often or always afraid to express their opinions out loud in class.

The Danish democracy survey shows that students have varying perceptions of their influence in the classroom. Students' opinions are split when it comes to the legitimacy of participation in decisions concerning the academic content of lessons. Some students say that they do not consider it desirable to be involved in decisions concerning teaching as such involvement would obstruct effective learning, while others take a very positive view of having an influence on teaching. They state that the involvement of students both instils a feeling of responsibility and is motivating of learning. The majority state that they are unable to change how they are taught and under a third feel that they often have an influence on teaching. The survey by the Children's Council also shows that meaningful forms of participation seem not to be widespread, as 54% of students are never or seldom involved in setting their own work plan, 90% of students never or seldom have the opportunity to choose the books with which they work, and 58% of students are never or seldom involved in choosing topics.

More Austrian students want to have more say on school issues than their parents do but this is still a minority demand whether from students or parents (41% students as compared to 18% parents). Those issues where students want to have more say are in matters which concern their every day life: around three-quarters mention the organisation of school events and the shaping of their recreation area; about 4-5 in 10 mention school regulation, the school canteen, influence on passing grades for students at risk, and teacher assessment. The more organisational and school policy related items, such as selecting staff, decisions about learning content, including the decisions about disciplinary measures, were mentioned by about one third of students or less.

As part of a study entitled "Youth in the Czech Republic" (2002), secondary school students said that they feel they can speak up on classroom-related matters, but most of them (61%) think they do not have a say in decisions at school level. The results of the IEA Citizenship Study (1999) also revealed that the confidence of Czech students and interest in active participation in addressing school-related problems is lower compared to many other countries. Two-thirds of secondary school students were positive as to having an opinion on school issues, and 60% were involved and interested. Students at six- and eight-year *gymnázia* are more active in this respect than lower-level secondary school students.

Students in the Slovak Republic clearly lament a lack of participation in their schools and see the freedom of expression as limited. Asked about what they would change in schools if they had the power to do so, students responded that they would like to have discussions in their lessons, and would like to be asked for their opinion about schooling. They want teachers to be fair, to create a good atmosphere at school and to provide students with more rights and the freedom to express their opinion and to speak openly. Many idealistically would like students to be given the right to select their teachers and to create their own education programme. They would like to be able to act more responsibly; extra-curricular activities would play a more important role and additional lessons and study groups would help weaker students. Class size would be reduced, school premises would be utilised in the interest of students, and the curriculum harmonised with the needs of practical life.

The formal representation of student voice

As regards more formalised ways of involving students in decision-making, most countries have done more to promote parent participation than that of students. Opportunities for student decision-making with regard to important issues are limited. Where they exist they are not always seen as effective. The existence of student councils and other representative bodies can be an important means to provide a schools' student body as a whole with a voice to articulate concerns. The effectiveness of student councils is, however, affected by the teachers in charge and their commitment, which seems to differ widely. It is also affected by the general culture of participation and listening to "student voice" – where such a culture is weakly established it will not be surprising if formal structures are not taken seriously by the majority of students.

Danish secondary students are guaranteed direct influence on the teaching itself via legislation stipulating that the choice of methods and material must take place as far as possible in co-operation between teachers and students. In addition to this, a number of provisions guarantee students' involvement in decisions of individual significance – for example, teaching in optional and elective subjects, year 10, special teaching, etc. If a school has year 5 or higher students, the students may form a students' council. Students are represented on the school's board of governors. Three-quarters of students in Denmark consider that the students' council is important or very important for the school (the proportion decreases up through the years). However, 64% of students feel that the students' council has little importance for them personally, and this proportion increases in the older years. Although a large majority considers that the students' council is important for the school, they do not see it as a place where they can "voice"

their very personal demands and concerns about schooling. As justification for their scepticism, students state that their council makes decisions on insignificant matters, the decisions are very protracted, and that the teachers do not take it seriously. The influence of the students' council is said to depend critically on the contact teacher – too often the teachers are perceived as unenthusiastic and the council's work is left to the students with little impact on teachers and school administration.

In England, formal ways in which students can participate in decision-making in schools are the establishment of schools councils and the appointment of students as associate members of school governing bodies. A survey of schools carried out as part of the BT Citizenship Research Project (BT, 2003) reported that 86% of the schools surveyed had established schools councils. They are forums that give students a chance to say what they think about how the school is run. Members of a school council are normally elected by their peers to represent a class or year group to discuss issues raised by students through class representatives and year group councils. Since 2003, school governing bodies have been able to appoint under-18-year-olds as associate members. These students can attend meetings and be members of governing body committees, although they do not have voting rights (Hallgarten and Breslin, 2003). In Japan, the chance of the students' participation in school management is now opened through the policy of external evaluation which sometime includes students as evaluators in the schools. Although there are no Czech data as to the number of schools with student councils or parliaments, the proportion of active students is far lower in the Czech Republic than the average of the 28 participating countries in the study on citizenship and democracy (IEA, 1999): only 13% of students were sometimes involved in student council or parliament activities, while the international average was 28%. The proportion is higher nevertheless in six- and eight-year *gymnázia* (20%).

From this discussion, we can speculatively propose three conclusions regarding "voice". First, students are not very demanding about having greater say; they might even be described as surprisingly compliant. Hence, theirs tend not be unrealistic demands which might threaten the nature of schools as institutions and be impossible to concede. Second, though any strict comparison is difficult on the basis of this evidence, school systems do seem to differ as regards how ready they are to listen to students. This is a matter of general culture in a school system which is very difficult to quickly change, at least as much as it is about individual practices in schools and classrooms. Third, it is difficult to see how students can truly engage in their schooling unless they are being listened to since exchange is at the heart of learning, not transmission.

General discussion

This chapter has focused on a key population group – the students – rather than a conceptual element in the framework underpinning this study. Information on their expectations and satisfaction is sketchy in most countries, though there is some data available from international sources, like PISA and the IEA studies. There may be a perception that this sort of "subjective" soft evidence is inherently inferior to the firm "hard" measures such as class size, teacher qualification level and so forth. Such a hard-nosed view where it does prevail leads to only limited understanding of how education can be improved. It is at odds with any ambition to move from an essentially technocratic "supply-led" perspective towards one which is much more informed by "demand", *i.e.* the views and wishes of the various stakeholders being served by education.

The country material indicates that students have a multi-dimensional understanding of what schooling is about. School is at the same time a place to learn, to meet friends and to get the necessary credentials to get ahead in life. Regarding their satisfaction, the limited data reveal several tendencies across countries: students are fairly satisfied, although older students are less satisfied than younger ones; students in higher tracks are more satisfied than students in lower tracks; girls are more satisfied with schooling than boys. The general perceptions of school by students are, then, broadly positive albeit with a larger or smaller minority of students who plainly hold more negative assessments.

The social environment of school, friendships, and the peer group are clearly important determinants of the positive viewpoints, to such an extent that school can be an attractive place to attend even when its manifest purpose – teaching and learning of the curriculum – is not well achieved. With regard to the content and methods of teaching, students express a preference for active, participatory learning and would like to see more opportunities to gain practical work experience. Teachers are most appreciated for good social and interpersonal skills and the ability to pay attention to individual student's abilities, interests and needs. All of this is "personalisation" of method rather than necessarily of curriculum. Regarding content of teaching students tend to be most critical about the schools' ability to prepare them for changing labour markets, namely to teach ICT skills, modern languages and teamwork.

There is a widespread viewpoint that school is "boring", or more particularly too many lessons are not interesting enough. It may be that school is anyway now out of tune with the current generation of students[2]

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[2] This issue will be explored in the "New Millenium Learner" project of OECD/CERI.

who grew up surrounded by technology so that, no matter how hard it tried, it would be found wanting. The enthusiasm of many students belies this pessimistic conclusion – the quality of the teaching, the personalisation of methods, and the interest of content can make the critical difference. The evidence concerning how dislike of lessons, even a particular lesson, can be telling for the vulnerable to become more permanently detached warrants particular attention: a relatively small but negative experience can have lasting consequences. Listening to student voice may be both individual teachers listening to individual students but also the extent to which the broad messages from the student population about quality, interest and methods are being listened to by the system as a whole.

All of this is pertinent to the aim of creating more personalised education. The quality of the education experience does seem to be critical to how students engage, not necessarily through having greater choice over options but through a more engaging educational experience in general. The opportunities for students to raise their voice are limited in almost all countries and where these opportunities exist they are not always seen as effective but depend on the commitment of the teachers, which differs widely. When asked, many students do not wish to have a say over curriculum or the bigger issues of school policy but instead want a school culture where they are respected and they are listened to on issues that very directly concern them. Rather than demanding greater choice they demand a more engaging education, which involves them more in whatever they are learning. If they don't get it, then it may well be seen as useful to have choice options which allow the exercise of "exit".

Regarding research, the findings on satisfaction suggest that our understanding of satisfaction and what it means for students needs to be more multi-dimensional. We need to understand both the learning aspects of schooling and the social context in which it takes place. Such research needs to go beyond the classroom to embrace the culture and climate of a school including the opportunities it offers for meaningful interaction with peer groups. It will be important to distinguish these two aspects in research on satisfaction to be able to address the results which are difficult to interpret at present. Why are older students less satisfied? Is it because learning at a younger age is less overshadowed by the pressure to get high marks or is it because schools fail to offer the right social environment for older students? The same can be asked regarding gender: are girls happier because they are more ambitious when it comes to schooling or is the social environment of schooling more suitable to girls? Or should we look for other ways of looking at these issues, which nevertheless maintain the student learner in spotlight?

To learn about students' expectations and satisfactions is not just interesting for research's sake. In the absence of effective means to make their voice heard, it is through other means (like surveys) that they are giving feedback. If policy is increasingly oriented towards recognising "choice" and "voice" as the legitimate expression of demand, it would be very partial to ignore what the pupils and students themselves have to say while listening to others. It does not seem that students are demanding anything radically different – a frequent complaint to be heard from older generations indeed is how conventional young people are, perhaps a sign that they have grasped all too well how critical educational success can be to their futures. Yet, if educational systems were to answer these criticisms and create active participatory teaching and learning environments and material viewed as interesting and relevant by the students this would imply radical change for many schools and teachers. The power of the student message is enhanced precisely because it is not radically at odds with what systems are officially striving to achieve.

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