

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The 21st century will be the century of identity
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As The Education Policy (1996:9) quotes the late Shiekh Zayed Al Nehayan saying ‘the people of this country are its most valuable asset and its greatest wealth.’, student as an asset have to be cultivated and nurtured. Given the speed at which the country is developing and growing, education plays an important part in preparing students to take an active role in society. This is a good time to be an Emarati student. Education services are free to university level, the political atmosphere is stable, and the country is heading to public election for Federal National Council (Sameer 2006). For students to build their identity and citizenship in U.A.E. society, they need to develop a voice and practise using it first in school, then in the community at large.

Students are the centre of any educational system. They are the beneficiary of the curriculum, teachers’ efforts and any positive school change yet they are the silenced mass that is expected to accept all and show gratitude for what is done for them. We have to ask the question: What do they think of school? Are the changes and development plans really working for them?

The present study examined students’ right to participation in school decision making by researching student voice using qualitative accounts of the students school experience. It investigated the nature of student voice in three government secondary schools for girls in Dubai, in particular their right to express views freely in all matter affecting them at school.

This study proposed a conceptual framework that uses school as community to examine student voice and the relationship between the students and the adults in school.

The Ghaf Tree

The Ghaf tree is a magnificent big tree that thrives in the desert. In the vast areas of the sand dunes you can see it standing alone or in groups. Its leaves are green and bright; it makes you wonder where it gets enough nurturance. Desert dwellers in desperate need for protection from the scorching sun seek shade under it. The Ghaf tree flourishes and prospers with roots deep in the desert in spite of the scant rain that might come or not come with the fleeting clouds in the desert sky.

It celebrates life with small tiny flowers that turn into seeds. When the wind comes, it carries the seeds. Perchance one of those seeds turn into another magnificent Ghaf tree. It doesn't mind that in a few weeks time summer is coming with furious heat. It keeps giving year after year, standing amazingly tall and proud in the desert.

In the study the Ghaf tree has more than one symbolic meaning. It reflects the image of community that caters for the needs of its members. It is also a reflection of the need to come up with local solutions to local problems. Borrowing from other cultures has a limit because what is offered by the West does not acknowledge the cultural and societal differences.

1.1 Research Questions

Broadly, this study explored student perceptions of school and how student voice was heard. A central concern was to examine how these students perceived their role in school decision making as expressed in student voice. The study was not built upon the assumption of testing certain hypotheses or a specific theory. Rather it is exploratory in nature in the hope of gaining new insights. The outcomes of such insights could contribute to a deeper understanding of student voice and role in Emarati government schools. The research questions that guided the study were as follows:

- How do students express their views and opinions in school?
- How do students perceive their role in school decision making?

1.2 Rationale for the study

What students could offer through their voice is a right and a missing piece in the puzzle of school reforms (Levin, 2000. Critchley, 2003). Studies in the field of student voice are conducted in different locations around the world and are gaining interest.

While scanning literature of student voice, one would notice that no such research was done in the Arab world or specifically in the U.A.E. This study is an endeavour to fill this gap so Emarati student voice could be heard for the first time. In an attempt to keep the authenticity of student voice, this study went directly to the source of student voice. It engaged the students to hear them in different ways. It used visual images as a research method for collecting data. The method has not been used extensively to capture student voice.

In 1997 UAE joined the UN Convention on the Rights of The Child (UNDP). Article 12 and 13 of the convention refers to the children's right to express their opinion in matters affecting them (Appendix 1). This study attempted to see if such expression is actually occurring in government schools.

The study makes the assumption that school as community framework will provide the supporting conditions for student voice. The students hold an important piece in the jigsaw puzzle of how school should be like and what would work for them. The picture can never be whole without their insights and perception. Student voice could also hold a strong position in training student on how to be citizens in a society that seeks to apply democracy principles. This type of research will be valuable to UAE education, where there have been no studies of this nature.

1.3 Background

As this study situates student voice within a context of social theory, we need to understand the social and educational background of the society in which students live.

1.3.1 Social and Cultural Context

UAE population has tribal origins up to the modern age. The tribe was not just the political unit of the society but also the structure that connected its members together and created strong relationships between them. Everyone worked for the common good of the tribe to survive the hardship in a barren land. Those tribes scattered in the desert created alliances between them. All the small tribes integrated into the bigger ones. The two main alliances were the quasem tribes which resided mainly in Julfar (What is now known as Ras Al-Khaimah) and the other one was Bani Yas which resided mainly in Abu Dhabi . This political system evolved into sheikhdom to emirates to state (Sultan 1994). While the tribe was the foundation of society now the state took the role of the tribe. After the formulation of the UAE as a federation, the whole society jumped from primitive simple living to post-modern living in the span of ten years.

The society jumped from rural society to civil society in very short period of time due to the economic abundance after the discovery of oil. This led to a dramatic increase in population (Sultan 1994). Society transformed into a dynamic one after being very isolated from the outside world under the British occupation. Now it has a network with the world through all possible means and methods (Maan 2000).

Such network exposed the society to many cultural influences from other societies. Maan (2000) claims the introduced cultural elements did not change the Emarati society as they were wisely modified according to the society's values and norms. He stresses that the changes affected the infra structure of country while the social structure was not affected. The Emarati society resorted to cultural borrowing in material conveniences only. On the other hand Sultan (1994) insists that it have an effect as the speed in which this happened deprived the society from the gradual

civic growth that is accompanied by gradual transformation and experiences necessary for a growing society.

The society is tolerant of multicultural ideals. New forms of communication technology are avidly embraced by the youth. Tens of TV channels bring in all kinds of social concepts and perspectives that are in conflict with what can be considered socially acceptable. Hogan (1997) stresses that post-modern age importance, is not primarily in communication technology or the varied modes of media but in how they influence and connect to new methods of self and group expression and how they help to form and refigure identity. No local studies were done to measure the influence of those new communication technologies except for the warning issued by local scholars that they would have adverse effect on the structure of society.

Globalisation is a fact of daily life in UAE society. Popkewitz and Lindblad (2004) stated that globalisation holds two contrasting meanings. While it promotes the humanity of all people around the world as the next step in progress, it carries the fear that it will lead local cultures to disintegrate putting national identity in danger of being weakened. Free market policy makes the country open not only to new economic practices but also new social values. According to Hughes (2004) global society is in fluid state, constantly changing and fragmented. This can naturally be reflected on the identity of the individual and specifically on the students when they are at an age that their identity is forming as are exploring what it means to be a UAE citizen.

The study is located in the vicinity of Dubai city. Dubai is a lively and vibrant city that caters for four million people most of whom are expatriates as the locals only form 21.9 % of the population of UAE according to the latest statistics from the Ministry of Economy (2006). The city's activities evolve around shopping festivals and tourist attracting themes. The image of the city as a cosmopolitan that attracts throngs of tourists from people around the world is strongly promoted in the media. Living in such a city the youth are surrounded by all year activities about entertainment and fun.

1.3.2 Educational Context

As U.A.E. society turned from a society of deprivation to a society of wealth and abundance; the state took the responsibility of providing better living standards to the Emaratis. It gave equal opportunities of education and other state services (Maan 2000).

State schooling is organised around centralised and strongly controlled national curricular with a stress on traditional cultural values. Ministry of Education (MoEd) is the planning and evaluating source of implementation for school. School is seen as an implementation site for all MoEd policies and decisions. In school, the principal holds the power to decide and give the green light for other members to act. The principal sees herself in a general supervisory role. Other members of the administration staff (specifically the assistant principal) are supposed to be the implementers of the school rules and regulations.

The growth of the schooling system is nothing less than astonishing. According to UAE Report on Millennium Development Goals (2004) before the forming of the federation there were 29 schools with 5494 attending students. This number grew to 744 government schools serving 306640 students in 2003. The National Report on the development of Education (2001) presented for the 64th session of International Conference on Education reported that the growth rate of government schools is 42% and the student growth in numbers is 22% just in the nineties period.

The growth of the education system was accompanied with a few problems. According to Salama (2000) one of the problems facing education in UAE is the reliance on other countries' experience and lack of initiatives with trying to accommodate the society's identity and problems led to the failure of a lot of school improvement attempts. School system reform is partial and does not encompass all the elements together. He argues that the curriculum is mainly theoretical and it depends on cramming the students mind with bits and pieces of information without any noticeable effect on their behaviour as citizens.

Benhabib and Zaini (2002: 400) when examining UAE education point out:

‘Cultural challenges will require openness to universal values, while maintaining national identities-linguistic and cultural without disengaging from the universal mission that is at the heart of the institutional ethos. Of affirming the religious and ethical principals that are often so much part and parcel of the heritage of scholarship and without denying alternative view points by closing the doors to an “open society”.

It is a formula that will need the effort of all educators to come with local solutions to local educational problems. Student voice is vital element in school life to engage students, understand how all the social changes are affecting them. It is the duty of the educators to bring the balance between national identity and globalisation values.

1.4 Limitation

The study has some limitations that can have an effect on the results reached and the generalisation of the findings. It represents only girls’ schools. If the study included boys’ schools maybe this will alter the findings. It was limited by the research methods used as mainly interviews (individual and group) were employed. Using other research methods like observation and journal writing were contemplated but again time and resources were the deciding factors. It also did not cover a larger section of the students’ population. It was limited by the short period of time it was conducted in. It only covered Dubai city and this cannot be used as a representative of the other areas in the UAE.

In spite of these limitations, the findings of this study can shed some light on student voice in the Emirates and encourage other studies to confirm or contradict the findings.

1.5 Structure of the study

The study is arranged into five chapters, a bibliography and appendices. Chapter Two is a literature review of student voice. Chapter Three presents the

methodology and research design followed in the study. It identifies the methods used to gather data; the sampling procedures for the targeted population are described. The conceptual framework of school as community that is used to interpret and making meaning of the data concludes the third chapter. The findings are presented in Chapter Four. Chapter Five presents the discussions of the findings, conclusions and recommendations. A bibliography and appendices conclude the study.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

The focus of this study is student voice in the context of school as community. This chapter is organised to discuss those two main components. This chapter has three sections. The first reviews literature on student voice and related concepts, the second examines the concept of school as community; the third is a summary of literature reviewed.

2.1.1 Meaning of student voice

The interest in student as a power in the sixties and seventies of the last century was grounded in the surge of the civil rights movement. The students demanded that they practise political participation as a right. Such movement retreated considerably up to mid-eighties when it started to gain more interest as what is called student voice, connected to school performance and reform. (Levin 2000; Mitra 2005).

The literature offers more than one definition of student voice. Fielding (2004 a,) views the field of student voice as a means to ‘encourage young people to articulate concerns and aspirations about a whole range of matters’ (ibid.197). Mitra (2005: p.520) defines student voice as a ‘construct that describes the many ways in which youth have opportunities to share in the school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers.’ For this study student voice will be defined as a school process of listening and responding to students in matters concerning them as well as a self expression outside the conventional structure of school. It is the “honoured voice” (Oldfather & Dahl 1994) of the students through which they express themselves and articulate their needs. For what can school offer them if it does not satisfy a genuine need for learning and personal growth?

Research studies indicate that students are the least involved in decision-making in schools(Levin 2000; Critchley 2003; Blase and Blase) . According to Blase and Blase (1997:87) students were “seldom included in school reform or shared-

governance initiatives in meaningful ways” . They concluded it is the reason behind students’ disconnection from their schools.

Student voice has to be considered as versatile and different as the individual students. MacBeath (2006:203) urged us to considered that student voice is simply not one voice but ‘... if student voice is to be understood , it is only by grasping the complexity of voices which find, or are denied, expression within the organizational life of schools.’

2.1.2 Purpose of student voice

What is student voice for? If we examine western literature, we find that it is usually attached to a function assigned but with the adults in control (Fielding 2004). It takes the shape and structure preferred by the adults. The students are considered as either a source of information or partners in research to raise the efficiency and effectiveness of the performance of the teachers and the school.

Literature sets different purposes for student voice. Lodge (2005) presents four purposes for student voice. They are quality control, students as a source of information, compliance and control and dialogue. In the quality control approach students are treated as passive source of information and feedback to measure the quality of the school services. In the second the students are also considered as sources of information but for school change and improvement. The effect is limited as students’ active engagement is not fully incorporated. In the third, compliance and control approach, students are given the chance to participate in decision making to serve the school purposes. There is a danger that the students become disengaged when they feel that they are manipulated and sometimes not taken seriously. In fourth , dialogue approach, students engage in real dialogue with the adults. It is a process that ensures students are heard and their needs are articulated. It improves the adults’ understanding of the students’ needs and how they learn.

Fielding (2004 a) presents three perspectives to explain student voice movement in England namely the neo liberal, the emancipatory and the post -structuralist. The

neo liberal hegemony connects student voice with learning. Students are heard so that teacher can respond to help raising students' attainment. Emancipatory critique suggests that neo liberals are using student voice as a tool for effective schools led by purposes addressed by adults. Students are made to comply with the adults' agenda. Post-structuralist respond by drawing attention to power relations as neo liberal only intensify the domination of adults and makes the students conform to their standards by real gradual commitment on the part of the students.

Student voice could have a function that transcends pedagogical purposes of education to building the identity and agency of the students. Ranson (2000) connects the voice of the student to the formulation of identity and agency. He offers a balance to the purpose of education by adding a cultural dimension to education. He suggests that learning should have a personal meaning to the learner where the learner enjoys what he is learning and it is meaningful to him. He develops the skills he needs. Ranson states that at the core of this pedagogy is the ability to have a voice.

2.1.3 Student voice and school reform

As was reported earlier student voice is mainly used in school reform. Fielding (2004 a) presents a typology of student engagement in school reform. Students can be used as a source of data when their past performance is used to measure any change in the school performance and when the students' opinions are sought after in questionnaires and surveys to find out where schools are failing and what do they think about different matters in the school. Students can also be active respondents when school administration and teachers talk directly to them and hear their opinions. Students can also be considered as partners and co-researchers with the teachers in doing research about the school. Teachers set the limits of what to research and how to do the research. The highest level of involvement for the students is to be the researchers, initiating and identifying issues to research. They have to be supported by the teachers for their endeavours to succeed.

School improvement literature stress the importance of the teachers' involvement and commitment to change but very little attention is paid to students.(Levin 2000) According to Levin (2000) students could simply resist or reject change that they

do not understand or they were not part of conceptualising. The second point is that students' perspective and knowledge is unique and different from the adults' point view.

Levin (2000) put forward the argument that student involvement can either be organisational or educational in nature. On the organisational level, students should be involved in school reform as they have perspectives of their own that should be respected. Such views can assist administration, teachers, and even parents to move towards reform that is meaningful to students themselves. On the educational level, active student voice is vital for constructivist learning. Students are not products of learning but more producers of school process, which means that their involvement is of vital importance for school reform.

Levin (2000:15) presents ways in which greater student involvement can be developed. He suggests that students could be included in school reform teams. He also suggested that school could involve students in the daily management process of the school and stresses the importance of providing students with the needed support and training for the students. He proposed providing student with 'parallel process of discussion of change.' so more students could be involved directly in school reform by survey, debates etc.

Motivating student toward school is another issue that has to be considered. Flicknoe (2004:417) put forward the question: 'Who goes to school with more positive expectations, people who expect others to tell them what to do all day or people who expect to take decisions themselves.' He stresses the importance of developing student leadership. According to him there are two effects for not cultivating the leadership skills of the students. It denies the community from benefits of training students on leading and also deprives the school from an important voice that can contribute to the improvement of learning practice.

Students should play a role in policy-making. Critchley (2003) in his research of the Canadian school system asserted that not enough policies are put in place to insure student involvement in policy-making. He suggests that major restructuring should involve parents and students in school councils. He stressed that students in the present system only have an advisory role. Students are used as a source of

information for policy makers who have the choice of incorporating what the students offer or just ignore it.

According to Rudduck and Flutter (2000), there is a need to invent and devise new ways to use students' insights and opinions about the school's processes and events. It will help build up their feeling of commitment to learning and to the school which might be reflected in better levels of attainment. They also question the motivation for seeking student voice. They claim that student voice only serves the performance of the school so that students will get better grades when it should be genuine and seeks to empower students with greater agency in schools.

Fielding (2004b) explores the shortcomings of the presence of student voice practice. He says that problems of speaking about the students would be value-laden and constructed as adults interpret the students' voice the way they see it fit in a language that they understand. Speaking on behalf of the students is closely connected to the social location and identity of the adults doing the talking. It will only lead to enforcing the school system to serve the objectives of the school as the adults see them.

One of the points Fielding (2004 a) raises is that some of his most ambitious work with students as researchers in the 90ies was difficult to repeat with the same degree of success in other schools. He attributes that to the school culture and structure. Student voice becomes no more than just another questionnaire presented to the students. Fielding (2001 a) criticizes the movement of seeking student voice to pinpoint the deficiencies in schools' performance. He wonders if student voice is a practice of liberation and transformative democracy or is it a new way of controlling the mass of students.

According to Fielding (2001b) students have become doubtful of the school showing real interest in their personal growth compared to the orientation toward performativity. The school's aim becomes only to raise standards and the level of students' attainment.

2.1.4 Student voice through student council

In Flecknoe's (2002) study of student council in an English school pointed out that student council offered students the opportunity to contribute to decisions in a meaningful way. It helped them to understand the concept of democracy. It also raised the morale of the students as they felt that their views were respected and helped them to develop their listening skills.

Taylor (2002) conducted a study on school council. She suggested that participating in a school council contributed positively to students' personal skills of listening, speaking and negotiation. The main benefit of the council was that it was a platform for students to bring out their views and concerns. She came to the conclusion that school council could be fitted into school decision making process.

2.1.5 Student voice and Power in school

Griffith (1998) describes two kinds of power relations at work in schools. The first is infested power. It is the traditional power structure of hierarchical nature. It gratifies the individual student success. Membership is offered to students who exhibit conformity to the codes and respect for the power relations. The members go through a system of apprenticeship; like being in the student council and head girl. The second is divested power. It is of a distributed nature. It respects the diversity students bring to school and it is built upon ethics. It stresses the shared and supported responsibility. It assumes the importance of negotiation and dialogue.

Friere (2003) in his criticism of the reality of education draws a picture of the student as a vessel to be filled and a being that does not know anything. The student is expected to sit, listen and comply with the teacher as the giver of knowledge and an authority figure. He stresses that the oppressed are not actually marginalised outside the society. They are inside the structure that make them oppressed. He proposes that the solution is not in integration but in changing the system to acknowledge their existence and role in full.

Staiger (2005) explains Foucault's concept of power at work in a regular school. School segments the student population in different rooms. They sit in rows of desks to keep them under control and easily observable. The school is in control of how time is distributed for the activities the students are engaged in.

Allison Cook-Sather (2002) elaborates on the issue of power as adults must be viewed as knowledgeable and able to offer useful insights about education. Adults need to understand and modify power relations within school so that the students are able to talk on their own behalf in a dialogue that transcends traditional relation of student –teacher.

Noyes (2005) reporting on the studies of students voice in England discusses the issues connected to power. The adults should have the ability and readiness to listen to students as they only listen to issues that they consider significant and worthy of being heard. They should have enough trust in students to hear even voices that make them uncomfortable. The adults will readily hear students who have the same values and able to express themselves in a way that is acceptable to the adults. This leaves out the students who are not doing well or who do not conform to the image of a model student.

2.1.6 Student voice, democracy and citizenship

Literature shed light on another area in student voice practise that educators have to consider in understanding and managing student voice. It is how student voice would lead to democratising school. Students could practise citizenship in school to prepare them for citizenship beyond the walls of the school.

Ranson (2000:263) reflected that while public policy recognizes and caters for the skills needed for the youth to enter the work market, it does not stress the importance of practicing participating and helping them 'to find the voice'. He points out that this is a challenge that has to be addressed for cities to regenerate and socially include the marginalized citizens. He states that citizenship studies emphasized citizenship as a right to help members of the state to integrate into society. He agrees that this has been criticized and gave rise to changes in the

element of theory of citizenship around : ‘participation, exercise of agency and deliberation’. (ibid: 265)

He stressed the importance of students learning how to engage in dialogue. He raises the concern that public policy is not emphasising such skills for students to live in a democratic society. Citizenship should be inclusive of accepting and acknowledging voices that are different. A chance to participate should be offered to all students equally.

Carter and Osler (2000) in their study of school culture, through the relationship between the students and teachers in the classroom, put forward the argument that for children to realise their rights in school context a major shift in school ethos has to occur. They reported on how teachers’ controlling methods produced ‘rigid classroom’ structure that worked against students’ participating actively which could lead to hindering the development of their identities. They supported the implementation of the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and suggested that students through participating in a democratic school will be able to develop their identity.

Varnham (2005) emphasized that there should be a shift towards equal responsibility extended towards student so they will learn how to exercise their right to participate in a democracy. She states that schools help formulate citizens in UK, US and Canada through the curriculum learning about citizenship and democracy, and that there is an argument for viewing citizenship as being practiced and modelled within the school formation. School can offer opportunities to practice and reinforce democratic values and principles. The school structure is authoritarian and hierarchical and students are considered at the bottom of it. Democracy in schools means giving students some kind of power and autonomy so they could feel an ownership of their own learning.

She reports on the Euridem project in Denmark, German, the Netherlands and Sweden. The project presents two levels of student democracy on the legislative level and implementation level. All the four countries had some policy put in place that required students to be involved in school decision making. Students were represented on school boards and committees in school and on local, regional and

national level. Students were also involved in planning curriculum and methods of teaching. Financial provision is provided for the project and students are supported with the needed training and guidance. There are problems facing the participation as many students showed no interest in being involved, and in some schools student participation was marginalized and was in name only.

Rudduck and Flutter (2000) consider that students can only learn about citizenship in an environment that presents them with opportunities to experience it. They point out that:

'Policy makers may think about school as primarily in terms of lessons and formal learning, but for pupils school is a holistic experience: it is about lessons, it is about what happens between lessons and it is about the regimes that define who and what matter to the school' (ibid:85)

While O'Loughlin (1995) described teachers as the gatekeepers of the culture, he points out that the role teacher can play in teaching student about democracy. He reflects that teachers can be instrumental in cultivating the critical voice of students in practicing democracy which could lead the way to social change.

2.1.7 Constraints on student voice

According to student voice research there are two main areas of constraints affecting the engagement of student voice in school. The first is in the mindset of the adults and the second is in the structures in educational relationships. Gerald Grace (1995) stresses that adults put forward the argument that students are not capable of participating in decision making due to their immaturity only to maintain the adults dominance.

Rudduck and Flutter (2000) extend this idea by considering students as able social actors. According to Critchley (2003) beside the lack of policies on clear student involvement the main constraint is in how adults use students as tokens. They are reluctant in sharing power with the students, as they do not believe that students are able or mature enough. Another point that he makes is that adult do not really know how to work with student voice.

Mitra (2005) highlights the adults' role in facilitating student voice. She reports on an American high school experience with student voice practice to conclude that adults had difficulty balancing two roles. They had to create space and opportunities for the student to take up leadership roles and provide support for the students. They could not let go of power relationship that characterised student-teacher relationship.

The second constraint is in how school is structured. The school system is dominated by the hierarchical arrangement (Levin 2000). The adults have the full authority over the students (Cook 2002).

Fielding (2004 a) is critical of much of the activities done under student voice as inviting disillusionment and failure because of the methods used and the social context surrounding them stress and build up control and submission of the students to the school system. It is also limited by the conception of what students can offer or are capable of doing.

2.2. School as Community

This study situates student voice within a larger frame of school as a community. It proposes a conceptual framework that uses school as community.

Clifford Cobb (1992:2) states that:

'In a community people take responsibility for collective activity and are loyal to each other beyond self-interest. They work together on the basis of shared values. They hold each other accountable for commitments. In earlier centuries, a person was born into a community and a set of reciprocal obligations. Now those who seek an identity as part of a larger whole must invent community by voluntarily committing themselves to institutions or group.'

Sergiovanni (1994) offered a different metaphor for describing school from an organization that seeks efficiency and performance to a community where people are connected by commitments and not contracts. It contrasts the metaphor of

school as an organization as he provokes us to think of school as ‘a collection of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together bound to a set of shared ideas and ideals’ (ibid:218). He invites us to ‘invent our own practice of community’ by devising new theory for educational administration.

Reynolds (2000) in his paper tracks down the use of the concept of community in management education. He presents D.B Clark’s definition of community as ‘a sense of solidarity and significant of individuals belonging to and in some way contributing to the whole so as to derive a sense of self worth’ (ibid: 68). He reflects that the idea of community came about to balance out glorifying of the individuals and his right and independence that led to the social irresponsibility’s towards the society and the social responsibilities towards the community. This study goes one step further in suggesting that the use of school as community is needed to balance the functionality of school administration as only a set of rules and procedures that will produce good students. Schools are dealing with human beings that need to be understood, accepted and given value. This is beyond the reach of any rule setting and procedures.

He argued for the benefits of community. School as community gives the individuals a part in sharing common responsibilities, which raises their feelings of significance. It helps in counteracting the hierarchical management system. He goes on to argue that scholars who are against the idea of community stress that it is a concept that is hard to apply in modern society. It is also critiqued because the individual has to conform to the group ideology. Community can be intolerant towards differences. This could lead to marginalization and exclusion of individuals who ‘voice’ different points of view. Reynolds concludes his argument towards a concept of a community that is more cosmopolitan and tolerant of differences. Shields (2000) warns us that schools can only succeed as communities if differences are celebrated and acknowledged and it is based on the diversity of strengths of the community members.

Shields and Seltzer (1997:435) urged education to examine

‘the concept of community as a moral endeavour based on dialogical processes that would help members of the school community to identify

underlying differences and commonalities of belief, to recognize the moral nature of their role and to strive to create inclusive and culturally democratic communities.'

The three main crucial factors in the development of sense of community in a school are a) the relationship between the school members b) the common values that connect the community members and d) sense of belonging. (Shields and Seltzer (1997)

Pritchard, Morrow and Marshall (2005:170) suggest that:

'In positive school environments, students comply with adult rules and values out of respect for each other, trust in adults, or gentle pressure from rituals established through symbols of unity-such as a school bulletin board devoted to students' projects or art work, or a nature trail developed by students, or pride in their principal, or a display case of athletic trophies.'

Reynolds (2000) raises a few questions that need to be addressed by any educator interested in applying the concept of community in education. The first revolves around the social theory that the design of school as community is based on. The second is about the restriction of time and space and how this would impose some difficulties in applying the design. The third is about giving voices that are different and opposing the needed support and opportunity to be heard. The fourth is in how the design would handle differences between members of the community. The fifth is about how such differences can be used to change or modify the design. The sixth is about the teachers' awareness of their own practice toward the differences. The seventh is about the teachers' awareness and acknowledgment of the power they hold in the class room as the evaluator of students' performance; and how this might have an effect on the design.

1.4. Summary

In summary literature indicate the importance of hearing students and involving them in school decision making. They have to be considered full partners in

education if any school movement to succeed as they are the ones that education process is directed to.

The review of the literature in which this study is grounded raises a number of importance considerations. It defined what student voice is. Student voice is considered as the missed element in the study of education. Students can offer deep insights of school. Students' voice can be used for school improvement and to help students train to be active citizens in their society. The main constraints of student voice are in the mindset of adults and how they view the student as incapable of participating in school decision-making.

School as community is defined by the relationship that connects its members, the shared values they hold and sense of belonging they have for it.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The study adopted an exploratory approach using qualitative research methods. This study is intended to be explorative as it seeks to illuminate and understand student perspective in the social context of the school. This study was conducted at three government secondary schools for girls in Dubai city, UAE.

3.2 Research Design

Like an artist, considering all the materials and elements for painting a portrait before venturing into the adventure of painting so the researcher has to consider the element of the research for her study. According to Hart (2005) the design is what connects methods used to collect data and analyse them with the research questions. The research design draws upon qualitative methods to ensure that all the dimensions of student voice are explored. ‘Qualitative research is naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meaning people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc.) with their social worlds’ (Ritchie & Lewis 2003: 3). Silverman (2001:4) refers to methodology as ‘the choices we make about cases to study, methods of data gathering, forms of data analysis etc. in planning and executing a research study’.

Focus groups, a workshop and individual interviews were employed to hear the authentic voices of students as well as the teachers and the principals. The analysis of the data focuses on the meaning the participants gave to their experience of the life in school.

Qualitative research was chosen in the belief that it is the best method to understand student voice in its social context. It helped the researcher to be immersed into the culture of the students. It allowed the questions directed towards the participants to form and change as the study proceeded (Krauss 2005).

According to Ritchie & Lewis (2003) qualitative research aims to provide a deep interpretive understanding of the research's participants' social world on the subject matter of the research. It employed a small sample using data methods that involve direct contact with the participants. The information collected helped the study to present a rich and detailed picture. The analysis identified patterns and emerging themes that interpreted the social world of the students in schools. It facilitated making meaning of the data collected (Krauss 2005). The study aimed to understand and make meaning of the experience of student voice.

Researcher Personal statement

As a researcher I came to the fieldwork with a bundle of tinted lenses to look at the matter of the research. From a child running to the school gate on the first day of school to a teacher dealing with the daily frustration of the job, to an administrator making the rules, to a mother of children going to the same school system. I am an Emirati to the bone. Like the Ghaf tree my roots are deep into the desert. Even though I came to research site only a few times in each school, I was easily accepted as I could have passed as any administrator, teacher or mother paying a visit to a local school.

Students were most curious. In the corridors I was approached by the students who wanted to know who I am. Am I the new math teacher? Or am I a new social worker? They were also the group-when they understood that I am in the school for research - that were most serious about participating and offering their opinions. The adults paused a lot in the individual interviews as if they were considering the issues of the research for the first time.

Through the research I had to struggle with a lot of emotions. (Appendix D) but by the end of it I felt that I had grown as a person. It made me more committed to education in my country. I will not shy away from telling the truth and I will use all my efforts to contribute to school efforts in raising the student voice.

3.3 Population and Sample

This study was situated in three government secondary schools in Dubai city during the 2005-2006 school year. Purposive sampling was employed to select both the sites and the participants. As the study was mainly focused on student voice, the primary data source was the students. Sampling of the students' population started with setting the parameters of the population. First only girls school were chosen. In Dubai, there are eight secondary schools for girls. Out of the eight schools, three were chosen. Each school serves a different geographical area in Dubai, so the schools embody a fair representation of the whole city. The sites of this study are three secondary government schools for girls. Each houses around 600 students. The majority of the students are Emiratis 95% , only 5 % come from other Arab nationalities. Out of the 45 teachers in each school the majority of the teachers are also Emaratis. Each school is served by 6 staff members including the principal; two assistant principal, two social workers and a secretary; all of whom are Emaratis.

Three grouping of participants were involved in the project: students, teachers, principals. The total number of participants was 171: 162 students; Students from grade 11 and 12 that participated in the research, six teachers; two teachers from each school and the three principals of the three schools.

The researcher made a direct request to school principals by phone, explaining the aim and purpose of the research. She got an oral approval from the principals. Due to lack of time and resources for the fieldwork, she did not seek an official approval from the MoEd, as this would have taken time to process. She resorted to the personal contact of the principals. They all approved the research subject and set the dates suitable for conducting the fieldwork.

3.4 Data Collection

Multiple data collection methods were used: focus group, individual interview and a workshop.

3.4.1 Focus group

Focus group as a research method was used to collect information from individuals in a group context. Nowadays it is used in different research fields from marketing to health to education (Hollander 2004). Flick (2002) justify using focus as it reflects and corresponds to everyday life expression of opinions. The group tends to correct the opinions not shared by the whole group.

The focus group sessions were conducted during school hours. Taking into consideration that the school day is highly structured around curriculum classes, the researcher sought the cooperation of the principal and the teachers. The groups were chosen from classes that their teachers were absent. The focus group members were from the same class.

The month of March was chosen as it was in the middle of the second school term. Students would have already formulated their opinions about the school year. It is a period when they do not have many tests and therefore both the administration and the teachers were willing to let the researcher meet with the students. It also gave the researcher ample time to conduct the targeted number of focus group sessions.

To provide a variety of means for collecting data from the sessions ; three ways weres used to help the group members express their feelings and opinions. They were given the choice of answering the questions orally or they could write it down on A4 papers or they could portraiyt it in drawings. Using the three methods gave an added richness to the data collected. It was a revelation that each focus group had at least one student who was able to draw cartoons.

The focus group was trialled to see how the questions would workout or if they need to be adjusted. The data from the first trialled session was not used. The researcher could not complete covering all the questions prepared for the focus group. This helped the other sessions to be more successful as time was an element that had to be considered.

The focus group sessions had their distinct dynamics. The ideal interaction would mean that everybody would participate and no one would try to control and steer the conversation, but in real situation each session had its own dynamics. Out of the fifteen sessions two were very quiet and members needed a lot of prompting. In two sessions one member tried to control the conversations while the rest of the sessions the group members kept the conversation lively and balanced. There was one occasion when two students refused to participate in any form. Their right to hold their voice was respected.

Hollander (2004: 632) in her study of the social context of focus group stressed that what is worthy of attention in focus group is 'how to understand and analyse the multiple complex interactional forces that lead participants to share some truths, withhold others, and manufacture new versions of reality in a given context'. In the focus group of the students, the researcher was able to experience how they share their truths.

Hollander states three contexts that have an effect on the focus group. The first is associational context: the common characteristics that bring the participants together. The focus group was of students and the pattern of conversation they held about the school, teachers and administration would surely be brought up in the session. Another effect would be what is acceptable to the whole group, as the individuals will usually talk about their shared school experience.

The second is status context. The focus groups were composed of the same gender; same grade girls, but there were elements that could not be controlled such as if there were any hidden status context at work between the group members in their school life. If for example they were part of a group of friends with one as a dominant individual that the other would follow in thoughts and conversation. The researcher also had to consider what is culturally acceptable to the conversational context. This is determined by the first response to a question as it sets the tone of the rest of the group responses.

The researcher's role in the focus group session was twofold. She was the moderator. She kept the pace of the session going and as the facilitator who kept

the conversation on track of the subject of the focus group. The researcher needed to probe in the aim of clarifying some points and to cover all angles of the emerging themes. The probing was directed towards the individuals of the group to elaborate a point, and sometimes it was directed towards the group as a whole by highlighting a comment or a sentence uttered by an individual to encourage them to follow the theme offered (Ritchie & Lewis 2003).

3.4.2 Workshop

The second method of data collection was a workshop. Further student description and analysis of their experiences with schooling were gathered from the workshop. Students from the three schools participated. The purpose of the workshop was to see how student voice would be employed when the students are given the chance to reflect and connect with their knowledge and experience (Chiu 2006).

Invitations were put forward to the schools and they sent 25 students in total. The workshop was conducted in school C as part of opening activities of its new resources room. The students used art and drawing their ideas of a dream school besides expressing them orally. The workshop was lively and the students participated and talked candidly. There was an audience present viewing the workshop were consisted teachers from the school and some officials from Dubai Educational Zone.

3.4.3 Interview

The third data source was interviewing the principal and two teachers from the three schools that were willing to participate in the study. The two teachers nominated by the principal were also interviewed. The interviews were open-ended semi-structured.

3.4.4 Visual Image as a research tool

For this study, the participants- produced drawings were employed as a means of data collection. Visual images as drawing from the focus groups and the workshop yielded more than sixty drawings depicting life in school. Even though it was intended as a support for the textual data of the research, going through the themes

of the study it was clear that the images actually held more richness and added elements for the themes. They underscored points that the texts could not.

Fischman (2001:31) presents the argument for using images and visual culture in educational research. He states that while major educational journals use images and artistic layouts to advertise its services and products, they do not extend such an interest to present research using visual images. He explains the interest in the visual stems from a common social and cultural reality of the images power in transferring concepts and promoting ways of life. We find it jumping at us from morning newspapers to billboards at the traffic lights. He adds that:

‘These sources have the potential of making our work not only more comprehensive and clear, but also politically more relevant because images not only carry information in constant battle over meaning but they also (or even fundamentally) mediate power relations.’

In this qualitative research, students were asked to produce visual material themselves as a way of exploring their relationship with the issues raised in the focus group. It allowed us to glimpse into their school world. The drawings hold an essential component in giving meaning to the context students experience in school. The study argues that a relationship between the drawings and the textual narrative of student perception allows for a deeper understanding about Emarati student voice.

It is a method that gives voice to the silenced. The time of the focus group session and the workshop was short which led to enquire how it can utilised fully by offering students more than one medium to bring out their voice. It has some risk taking as it is not a method that is commonly used.

3.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative data collection produces a large amount of raw data. For this study, all data collected from the focus group sessions and the individual interviews were first transcribed into English language from Arabic language as the mother tongue of the students and teachers is Arabic.

It was decided that the unit of analysis adopted would be the interview whether the individual interview or the focus group interview as it would be large enough to hold enough themes and small enough to be thoroughly examined. Case Studies of the schools was not chosen as the nature of the study was explorative; also not enough data was gathered from each school to draw a deep and complete picture to warrant using case study as unit of analysis.

A thematic framework was used to classify the data collected into themes and concepts emerging from the raw data of each interview first by familiarization with the raw data and labeling in cross sections, then sorting it into emerging themes (Appendix C). The next step was detecting patterns and finally developing explanations that offered meaning to the data as suggested by Ritchie & Lewis (2003) and corroborated by Krauss (2005:767)

‘Thus, through qualitative data analysis, meaning is constructed in a variety of ways. Through construction, the researcher is not a blank slate, rather he or she is an active participant in the process...’ p (Krauss2005)

Cross-interview analysis proved to be helpful as each focus group answered the same set of questions, to highlight students’ different perspectives from one focus group to another, and from one school to the other.

3.6 The Visual Images Analysis :

Bearing in mind that to analyse and interpret visual images would be challenging as little research was done to conceptualise and theorise image use as data collection method in educational research, the images produced as data were analysed using ideas from the visual grammar of Kress and Van Leeuwen summarised in Appendix C. Three main concepts are connected to it. The first is how the relationship between the characters in the drawings are emphasized, the second is how the viewer of the drawing is involved in it, and the third is how is salience created by different elements of the drawing.

3.7 Ethics

The study posed a few ethical issues that had to be addressed. The first was the anonymity of the participants. They were assured that their names would not be published and the schools would not be identified out of the schools in Dubai. They were assured that whatever they contribute would only be used for research purposes. Their consent to participate was requested and the principals' permission was taken to interview the students. It is a common practise as the principal and the teachers are considered as guardians of the students as long as they are in the school. The parents' permissions are usually taken for activities pursued outside the school premises. The students were given the choice of joining the focus groups. Only two students declined to do so.

The second was the confidentiality of the data and information disclosed. Some students were apprehensive. They expressed a fear of being reprimanded if the school knew about some of the issues they raised. This happened to them in the past when they were encouraged to express their opinions of some of the teachers only to find out that the teachers were informed about the details. The teachers would get angry and upset with them. On the other hand two focus groups actually encouraged the researcher to show the principals what they had written and drawn in the focus group sessions. The participants were assured that they would be anonymous in the study.

The third issue was the responsibility and burden of presenting the students' voice without being corrupted by the researcher's voice, logic and personal interpretation. Every measure was taken to present the data as they were presented and to narrate the students' story, as it was unfolding through the data. The study presents students voice as it was vocalised by the students and that is why interpreting the data took a back seat. Interpretation was offered only to clarify a few matters that were taken for granted by the participants. In addition, interpretation was used to connect the parts of the data to the whole.

The purpose of the study half way through the research posed an ethical dilemma. Was listening to student did come from a genuine interest in really hearing them out or was it for research purposes to get the masters degree? Going through the

recorded interviews the researcher found herself at certain points rushing the students due to time restrictions. What can be said here is that research was done in the hope of serving student voice and presenting it to the best ability of the researcher. It is not giving voice to the silenced but more of presenting student voice by providing the students a platform and a medium. It is a relatively new terrain. The study might even be met with strong criticism from educators in Dubai educational field as they might consider enabling the voice of students as a form of rebellion against the school system. To them it might be rude or impolite even to talk about or against a teacher or a school. Some of the adults present at the workshop expressed such views.

3.8 Theoretical framework and descriptive categories for the discussion of data

This study proposed to study student voice in the context of school as community. It situates student voice within a larger frame of school as a community. The framework offers a comprehensive integrated conception. It is a framework derived from culturally assimilated concepts of what it means to be part of a community. The proposed framework attempts to identify and map the nature and dynamic of the complex forces shaping school as community. Some elements of the model are drawn on theoretical constructs in social theory of community. School community is defined and shaped by the relationships its members have with each other. For example if we consider the school community like the Ghaf tree that protects and gathers all the school members under it, then all the members will feel a need to be there supporting each other and helping the community to grow. The school grows stronger by the set of values they have. Those values could be easily agreed upon from the principle, the teachers and the students as religion could be the source of such values. Such values should be agreed upon and worked out in the school community.

Three concepts are at the core of the framework. They are 1) caring 2) governance and 3) agency (Figure 1). The conceptualization of community was not forced on

the data but came about from reading the data and the emerging themes which fit the exploratory nature of the study.

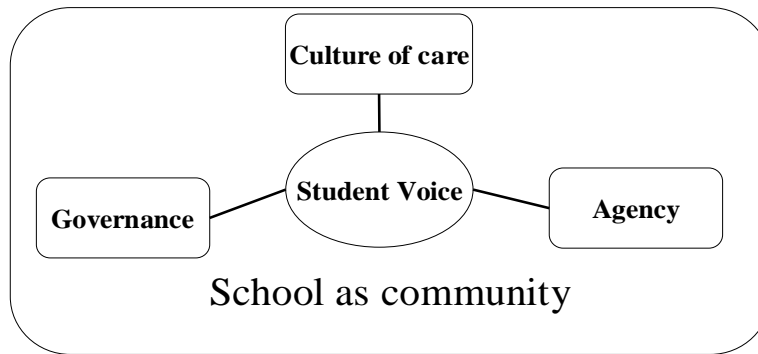


Figure 1 School as community framework

It is a framework that formed the foundation of evaluating school, as community with the specific components that build a strong school community are governance, agency and care as illustrated in Figure 1. The three components offer to examine the role and identities of the members of the school community and define their relationship towards each other. They also position student voice as a central theme that could help schools move forward. They offer to make meaning of what was transpiring in school, providing a method of examining the dynamics of the relationship between the students and the adults in school, particularly how they understand each other.

3.8.1 Culture of care

Two elements are connected to the culture of care. The first is that it is needs-based (Nodding 2005). The needs of the students are attended to by the school members, whether the administration staff or the teachers, by first identifying the nature of those needs. In this study, it is suggested that the needs of other members of the school are also identified and considered so that the need of the students can be met.

Noddings (2005) stress the importance of negotiating the educational needs of the students. The students need to understand the value of the curriculum they are taking to their personal growth. Here engaging students in dialogue about the curriculum could help the teacher understand the mindset of the students and how they feel about the lessons they are taking. Teachers should be honest in conveying the objectives of the lesson and be honest in admitting the irrelevance of some parts of the lessons. Students may not see or understand the importance of what is offered in school with their lives outside it or connect with their future without the insights of the teachers as teachers can sometime know better. According to Noddings (2005:157)

'In an ideal class room dialogue become a way of learning , caring teachers show that they are willing to rethink inferred needs, and students should be encouraged to criticize and re-evaluate their own interests, wants and purposes.'

The role of dialogue should also transcend the walls of the classroom to the whole school. Dialogue should become a daily and celebratory practice in school. It is practiced to change the status quo. It should practiced at different levels between different members of the school community. Still it should always have one objective and that is to understand and to create new reality for the school and to accept what cannot be changed.

3.8.2 Governance

The two concepts related with governance in this study are: consultation and proximity The governance model could be derived from the tribal concept of government the country is built on as mentioned in the background. The governor – The principal and teachers- understand that they have power but only to set the limits and to help the community function. The governed (students) are consulted regularly and all matters of the school in forms that are practiced out side the school walls. It could be in the form of School Majlis (Majlis has two connected meanings: a place to meet in and a practice of meeting at a regular time and place.).

The governor and the governed have a close face-to-face relationship. The governed is taken seriously even though it is not a western democratic model. Proximity is an issue of important value in local system of government. It means being there for the people and meeting them everyday and responding to their needs instantly. It transcends going through the channels of boards, meetings and committees.

3.8.3 Agency

Bandura (1986) suggested that school by undermining students personal efficacy pushes student to lose agency and motivation. School operated in conditions that deprived students of feeling of agency. Students felt that they were controlled by adults' rules

Wyn and White (1997:20) point out that

'The playing out of the agency is always undertaken within the context of structural settings and parameters. What gives any particular structural instance of agency its social content is the institutional and cultural framework within which it is exercised'

Two interconnected elements constitute agency. They are power, responsibility and ownership. Power is impeded in the structure of school as a hierarchical bureaucracy. It is a system which holds the ability to decide and is acted out in formal organizational roles. Muth (1984) presented Max Weber definition of power as individual in a social context (an actor) carrying out his will over others' in spite of resistance. He went on to categorize subtypes of power relations. He proposed three subtypes. The first is coercion. An actor uses force to control the others' behavior. The others show resistance. When the others submit to the actors' will, his superiority is confirmed.

The second subtype is authority. It is the legitimate power given to the Actor, where he is in command and the others accept it and follow his command. The third subtype is influence. It is connected to the actors ability to affect the others behavior without resorting to force or authority; such influence is accepted by the

others as it satisfies their own needs. In school as community everyone understands that they have a role to play and hold some kind of power.

Agency in this school as community concept, all members realise that students have to be trained for active participating in society so giving students space to act and be responsible members in schools becomes a right extended to every student while this right comes with responsibility.

Ranson (2000) explains that the aim of education is a growing awareness in the individual of his capacities of learning and being engaged and motivated to improve his performance with a clear purpose for learning co joined by a growing awareness of oneself leading to self-awareness and self-respect. The others recognition of one's abilities heightens self-identity, independence and agency.

Students are trusted to be responsible when given the power to participate in school decision making. That giving of trust and space to act even to the point of making mistakes is what agency is all about. According to MacBeath (2006:197) 'identity and agency arise through discourses which generate different ways of knowing self and give rise to multiple identities, located in the larger structures of class, race and gender.'. Through action, students will be able to position themselves as important members in the school and in action; students will identify their ability to act. Their energy will be absorbed into school, not as negative energy, but as a force that build. O'Loughlin (1995:108) laments that:

' the typical regimen of public schools, in which obsession with behavioral control manifests itself in everything from bathroom and hallway passes to the need for explicit permission to speak in class , denies the children the opportunity to nurture tentative ideas develop initiatives, learn from their mistakes and assume progressively greater responsibility for their own actions'

That need for control will greatly diminish as students' agency is acknowledged and put to use for the good of the individuals and the whole community.

3.9. Summary

The research design consisted of using focus group, individual interviews and a workshop as research methods. Data were analysed to determine students' perception of school. The school as community concept was used to interpret the data collected

CHAPTER 4

Findings

In this chapter, the findings from the research are presented by each research method used. In the first section the focus group findings are grouped by the themes that emerged. The second section the workshop findings are presented. The individual interviews of the adult participants are in the third section. In the fourth section, the visual images of the students' drawings are analysed according to Kress and van Leeuwen analysis of visual images. The last section is a summary of the findings.

The present study aimed to examine student right to participation in school decision making by researching student voice using qualitative accounts of the students' school experience; in particular their right to express views freely in all matter affecting them, also their role in school decision-making. It investigated the nature of student voice in three government secondary school for girls in Dubai. This study provided a platform for students to discuss aspects of school and to voice out their opinions in a non-threatening atmosphere. The students were asked to describe their school experience and how they see their relationship with the other members in the school. They were requested to comment on their role in school decision making.

4.1 Student Focus group interviews

All the 15 focus groups were addressed by five main questions. The focus groups covered the following topics:

- 1- Purposes of school (as students see it).
- 2- Relationship between students, teachers and administrators.
- 3- Students concerns in school.
- 4- Students' contributions to school decision make.
- 5- Student council.

In this section, the study will present the emerging themes for each question in each focus group first as a table then as a narrative of what transpired in the sessions.

Question 1: Why do you come to school? The aim of this question was to understand how students view the purpose of education.

Emerging Themes	Focus groups (FG)															Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
To be with friends	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
To socialise	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
To make new friends	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
To get certificate	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
To get out of boredom at home	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
We have to as school feels like a prison	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	12
We are in the habit	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	11
As a family duty	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	10
An Islamic duty		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			10
To have a purpose in life				✓		✓						✓				3
To form our personality								✓	✓		✓					3
To go to college										✓	✓	✓				1
To take teachers as role model											✓					2
To get a good husband												✓				1

Table 1 Purpose of school

Table 1 depicts the emerging themes for the purpose of school as students saw it. The students in this study reported the purpose of going to school. The students in this study reported the purpose of going to school. A majority of participants indicated and insisted that social values of school as the main purpose while the values of learning came second to the social values. The students said that the main purpose for attending school was of social nature. They come to school to be with their friends and spend a good time.

‘We come to school to be with or friends.’

‘We can’t wait until we have a free period or for the break time to be with our friends.’

It is also a place for them to grow socially by practising the social skill of making new friends and meeting new people.

'We also come to school to laugh, have fun and make new friends.'

The same exact sentence was repeated in every focus group.

Boredom from sitting at home as they are not expected to play an active role at home except to study for school. The school become the first place to be active in. More than half of the focus groups also said that they understand that it is a social duty and a family obligation towards their parents and to please them, they attend school.

'We come to school to please our parents.'

They said that they are in the habit of coming to school.

'We are used to coming to school since we were small children. We have nothing to do in at home. It becomes very boring.'

Some students said that if they had the choice they would not come to school but they do not have an alternative.

Students create a sense of place and belonging towards the school. They attach a social function of a higher value than the educational function, which comes second. They attend school to get the certificate and to get a job.

'Nowadays the certificate is most important so we can get a job.'

Some groups acknowledged that learning is a value encouraged by Islam.

'It's true that we come to school to learn and we have to learn because Islam, we want to satisfy Allah. We wish they complemented learning with entertainment so we will not get bored.'

Other reasons for attending school were offered by the students but they were of lesser importance. They were forming their personality, finding a purpose in life, and taking teachers as role model. A student went as far as connecting the purpose of school to getting a better future husband as men go for working educated women.

Interestingly enough only one group of students connected the purpose of school to going to college. They did not consider it as a preparation period for college entrance when college was only a few months away for half of the students who participated in the focus groups.

Question 2: How would you describe your relationship with other students, teachers and administrators? The aim of this question was to understand the kind of relationship that connected students with the other members in school.

Emerging Themes	Focus groups															Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Students:																
treat other students as they treat us	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
Student love and respect each other	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	12
Students have a lot of arguments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	13
Teachers:																
We treat teachers as they treat us	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
not given the chance to say our opinions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
Send us to administration for little things	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
Don't show enough care	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		12
Treat smart students better	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
Not enough respect between us	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		11
Administration Staff & Principal																
Staff in control of the rules	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
They take teachers side	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		12
Don't hear our opinions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
Use rules unfairly against us	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
We respect the principal	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
We rarely see the principal	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15

Table 2 Relationship between students, teachers and administrators

Table 2 illustrate the quality of relationship that connects the school members as perceived by the students.

Students' relationship with other students:

Most groups said that the relationship between the students depends on how students perceive each other. They said:

'With some students we have good relationship, with others it depends on how they treat us'

More than half of the groups said that students engage in many arguments. Sometimes the arguments turn into physical fights. A student reported such an incident:

'One girl attacked another girl that day. The administration just expelled them both without hearing what was the story. Poor girl! It was not enough that her face was full of cuts and bleeding but she was punished.'

Students' relationship with the teachers

The students described two kinds of teachers: the caring teacher who showed enough care and the teacher who is shouting at them all the time.

'some teachers are good and understanding and some are so bad we wish that the ministry changes them.'

Student said that many teachers did not show enough care.

'Last week a girl was absent. She went to the teacher because she wanted her to explain the lesson. The teacher refused and told her to ask one of her friends to do that.'

'Some teachers enter the classroom angry and waiting for a student to do something so they would shout her.'

'If a student is absent some teachers refuse to repeat the test for her.'

Students felt they needed better relationship with the teachers and asked for some kind of rules for that defined their relationship.

‘We need rules and regulations that define the relationship between the teachers and the students.’

To a certain extent, the students felt that they equal to the teachers. They said:

‘We treat teachers as teachers treat us.’

‘When the teachers show us respect and compassion we feel comfortable and treat the teachers the same way.’

The students reported that they did not like the way the teachers treated them. They objected to being treated as babies and punished as small children.

‘When a problem arises in the class if some of the students are late for the class the teacher would just send them to the principle’s office.’

‘As a way of punishment they make us stand at the back of the class or they refuse to let us in class’.

‘As a punishment the teachers make us stand for being late for class or if we could not answer a question.’

‘We are secondary school students, how could they punish us by making us stand at the back of the class?’

The students expressed that they know how to make the teachers get angry.

‘When a teacher treats us unfairly, we know how to get back at her. We would be late to her class, not pay attention to her lesson and cause problems for her.’

An issue that all focus groups raised is that in school they felt that only few teachers listened to them or considered their opinions.

'Some teachers treat us unfairly. They treat us as small children. They are impatient with us. They will not listen to us'

'We wish they just listen to us. We have very good ideas.'

They reported that they try to explain their views but teachers stop them. Usually if what they want to talk about are their personal or family problems they have better chance of being heard.

'They do listen if we have personal problems'

Students' relationship with the administrators

The administrators were the most disliked group in the school. They are the implementers of the school regulations.

'With the administration there is no understanding for everything 'you are suspended from the school for three days!'.'

'Members of the administration staff only shout at us'

'The way the administrators treat us, makes us hate them and misbehave.'

Students' relationship with the principal

The only adult that all students said they respect was the principal even though they complained that they do not see her very often.

'We have to respect the principal.'

'We love our principal. She is a good principal.'

'Most of the time we don't see the principal; I mean feel her presence.'

'The principal is not present. We didn't see her. She is missing, by the way this our second year in this school and we are still looking for her.'

‘The principal doesn’t know anything about the students and we don’t know any thing about her.’

‘We don’t have morning assembly that is why months pass by and we don’t see the principal.’

When the researcher enquired about seeing the principal in morning assembly, the students in the three schools said they do not have morning assembly on a regular base.

‘We have morning assembly for two reasons either to give some students a prize or to bombard us with new rules and regulation.’

4.1.3 Question 3: What are your concerns in school?

Emerging Themes	Focus groups															Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Rules against personal freedom	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
curriculum is long and boring	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
Our voice is not heard	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
We feel under pressure	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
We are discriminated against	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
Not enough time to play & have fun	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
We are treated like babies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		12
School feels like prison	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	11

Table 3 Students’ concerns in school.

Table 3 depicts the main concerns of the students. The first concern that all the students mentioned was about the rules and regulations of the school. They said that those rules are against their personal freedom. The school controls what they wear, what kind of hair ornaments to wear and the colour of embroidery on the black shaila (head cover) and the colour of the shoes they wear. They said:

‘Everything is taboo and not allowed.’

The schoolyard becomes a daily battle field where members of the administration follow students to check out what they are wearing and if they are hiding colourful head accessories.

'Why can't they understand that we are teenagers? We want to have fun and enjoy ourselves.'

'Their rules are against our personal freedom.'

'They keep telling us wear this, do this.'

'They have no right to even decide where to sit in class.'

The second concern they have is that they feel that they are under pressures. They have many tests that seem to be daily and sometimes there is a conflict between dates of two exams.

'We feel under so much pressure. Tests, tests, tests.'

'We have classes on after another with no breather between.'

Doing well in school was an objective expressed by the students, but they had many reservations over the curriculum. They said that the curriculum is long and boring and disconnected from daily life.

'We don't like the curriculum.'

'We have math, chemistry, physics, Arabic and Islamic studies all in one day. It is so boring.'

Again the theme of not being heard recur in this question as one of the concerns they have in school. They stressed that teachers do not listen to them and treat them like babies.

'We don't understand why they treat us like babies and not listen to us.'

'They don't listen to us.'

'Sometimes it feels like we are talking to the dead.'

The pupils also mentioned that discrimination between the smart students and the other students was an issue that disturbed them. The students objected to being discriminated against.

'Everybody treat smart students differently.'

'Smart student are taken seriously and the ones loved by the teachers.'

Those students are given more chance to be heard. If sometimes they misbehave, it is tolerated even when they break a school rule they usually get away lightly with it.

The students also said that if a student is strong willed and have a strong voice and demands her rights they listen to her, but if she is quite then no one will listen.

'That day we had a school trip. One of the students refused to board the bus. They took her to the administration. She said that she did not want to go and they could not force her to do so. They really listened to her and let her stay in school. She was very brave and loud.'

The students felt school like a prison. Eleven groups repeated this idea.

'School is a prison. We would not attend school if we didn't have to. That is why we are absent from school a lot. Look today we have six absent girls.'

4.1.4 Question 4: Do you contribute to school decision making? The aim of this question is to track the kind of practices that the school had set to involve student in school decision making.

Emerging Themes	Focus groups															Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
We don't participate in any kind of decisions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
No one takes us seriously	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
Rules are forced on us	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
They don't hear us	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15

Table 4 Students' role in school decision

What emerged from this question is that there was no regular or formal strategy in school to involve students in school decision making at any level.

They said that the administration is in control of the rules, it is impossible that they will participate in serious school decision making, only students who are good sometimes get consulted in very minor matters. They said they don't have enough space and opportunity to say their opinions. They feel that they are taken lightly.

'No one takes our opinions in anything.'

'Even when we say our opinion they don't take it seriously. There is place for discussing anything.'

'No one takes our opinion in matters like tests timetable, trips, open day, cafeteria price list and our graduation party'

'We are not able to voice our opinions as the school does not accept any from us.'

'Even when they hear us, they don't take our opinions seriously'

Some groups have gone through the experience of being consulted about the performance of the teachers, they were promised the confidence of what they will

reveal. They were happy about the chance and they were very frank but what they discovered later is that the teachers would be informed about it. They had to suffer through the rage and the fury and silent treatment as how dare they say such things to the administration. They said:

'What is the use of expressing our opinions if we have to suffer later?'

Sometimes student opinions are taken in surveys and questionnaires as a way of consulting the students. At one school the administration, before the end of the year, conducted a survey to measure the relationship between the students and the other members of the school. The following year they expected some changes to happen only to discover that everything was going as usual.

'Things don't change.'

One group brought up an incident they seemed to be discussing between them earlier. They said:

'Last week a subject supervisor came to our class. He asked us to connect a concept we were studying with a political event. No one was able to respond with an answer. When the supervisor left the teacher said that she was disappointed in us as we did not express our opinions.'

They were laughing and joking about it. They said:

'How did she expect us to have an opinion when we are used to coming up with only one model answer to specific questions.'

Most of the participants, with the exception of a few, indicated a need or interest in participating in school decision making.

'We want to participate, but who will listen to us?'

'We wish they gave us a bigger role. We really can.'

The students also understand that their right to have a voice and participate is connected to their choice to not participate. More than one student who proved

good drawing talents in the drawings for answering the research questions refused to participate in school activities.

‘I choose not to even tell teachers that I can draw. I do not want to do it for the school.’

‘I don’t want to express my talent in school; I can do that at home or anywhere else’

4.1.5 Question 5: What do think of student council?

Emerging Themes	Focus groups															Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Only smart students are selected	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
It does not represent the student majority	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
It is useless	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15
We don know if we have one	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		11

Table 5 Student perception of Student Council

Students did not agree if a student council existed in their schools or not. They were not aware what the function of it was. Some groups said it has no real role. They do not understand how students are chosen to join it. One student said:

‘Student council is for exceptional students. Up to now, we do not feel we have a role to play in school except to come to class to study and teachers get angry at us’

‘The council’s activities are for outside of the school. They do not serve us.’

‘What is the use of the council if our voice won’t reach the administration and the ministry.’

They also stressed the idea that in reality student council does not represent the majority of the students.

'There is a student council but in name only there are no meetings. We are not consulted.'

'Anyway the student council does not represent us. The students in it are chosen by the administration. They are not actually elected by us.'

'There is a student council. The students who join it waste their time. They miss classes.'

4.2 The workshop: (The School I dream about)

The workshop participants were twenty five students from three school. The workshop consisted of four steps. In the first step, the students expressed all their ideas and views of what a model school would be and how. In the second step, the student had to choose five most important issues they want in their model school out of the ones they raised in step one. In step three, they have to come up with what will be the obstacles that would stand in the way of making the dream come true. In the last step they were asked to think of what they could today as a first move towards the dream.

4.2.1 The First Step: All you can dream.

In the first step, the students expressed all their ideas and views of what a model school would be and how it would look like. The first group spokes student stood up and said:

'Whatever we say we are not heard, whatever we do we are not appreciated.'

They wished to have better school facilities with better gym and swimming pool. They wanted to have a coffee shop in school. One group suggested what they called a school without borders (Image five in visual image section). It was a very creative a design and offered a flow the students felt was missing from school.

They also considered the curriculum; they felt that it needed to be modified. They felt that the scholastic term system need to be changed to semester system where

they don't have to be tested twice on the subject once at end of the term and again at the end of the year.

Beyond the physical aspects of the school they were seeking better relationship with the teachers.

'Why can't there be more understanding between the students and the teachers?'

'Why can't we resolve our problems without resorting to the administration and our parents into the picture?'

Three groups out of the five groups that participated wanted a regular dialogue sessions with the principal.

'We want a dialogue with the principal regularly one or twice a month.'

'We want a chance to talk publicly about our problems.'

They expressed their idea of what a model school could be devised to have less rules, They felt that the rules are too restrictive for them.

'We don't to be expelled for silly reason.'

4.2.2 The second Step: The top five issues

The student knowing that they were limited in choosing five important issues in their dream school. When prioritizing, the issues participants discussed were: 1) Modification of the curriculum. 2) Changing term system 3) More open dialogue 4) Testing system 5) and more trips. When the researcher asked why they chose those issues over the other ones they said

'The other issue are minor in comparison to the curriculum and testing issues'

In the middle of the second step one teacher who was present as audience could not hold her self, she just jumped up and started talking to the students explaining that the teachers are under a lot of pressure and they have many responsibilities and not just catering to the needs of the students. She had to be reassured that the workshop was for the students as a space to talking without feeling threatened. Voice of the teachers is an important issue but one that was not under study here. The students were not intimidated by the teacher's stunt and kept expressing their views and opinions in very strong language. Probably she was from another school that the group of students participating in the workshop did not belong to.

4.2.3 The third step: Obstacles of the dream

When discussing the barriers and obstacles that would hinder the dream school from becoming a reality, the students said:

'The first obstacle is the budget.'

'The refusal of people who are in charge.'

'They won't be convinced of the students' opinions.'

'The ministry is not free for the student's views and opinions. They are busy issuing rules and regulations and test timetables.'

4.2.4 The Fourth Step: What can you do today?

This step was the most difficult one for the students as they had to come up with what they can do today as a first move towards the dream. The workshop was a unique opportunity to take student voice to a higher level. It required them to engage in seeing the future with positive perspective, at the same time directing them to prioritize matters that are connected to school. They came up with suggestions to improve school. Prioritizing was easy for them. Still they could not see themselves as part of the solution. They could not see themselves holding any active part towards a positive school. It was someone else's role. They expect to be saved. They expect their complaints and grievances to reach someone in a high position, someone who will help solve their problems. The students said:

'We will send a letter of complaint to the minister.'

'We will ask to meet the minister.'

'We will talk to Sheikh Mohammed (Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum; UAE Vice President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai).

Before the end of the workshop a student stood up and said:

'Why should I care what happens in school in one year's time I will be out of it.'

4.3 Individual interviews questions:

To put student voice into context six teachers and three principals participated in the study. For the adults participating in the study were not familiar with the term "student voice". It was the first time they had heard such a term. The interviews were about an aspect of school that they did not give it much consideration. They answered question in individual interviews about student role in school decision making. The principals and teachers perceptions were expressed in this section.

4.3.1 Question 1: How do adults see the students?

The Teachers

All teachers were of the opinion that this generation of secondary school students are difficult to handle. They are rebellious, complaining all the time,

As one teacher said:

'They are articulate, active and rebellious. Interest in learning takes second priority to playing. Their heads are filled with other stuff.'

Another teacher stressed the same idea:

'They are defiant. They are different than how we were in school. We used to be afraid of the teacher. We wouldn't dare open our mouth against her. This generation...They don't show enough respect.'

One teacher said

'Girls in our secondary schools are strong willed; they do not like teachers to force them to do anything or even the administration.'

They also said that the students are demanding more personal freedom by deciding what they want to wear and how they want to conduct themselves.

Most of the teachers interviewed expressed an acceptance of the students.

'I treat students like my little sisters. There is no difference between the lazy and the bright students, I feel students need to be heard.'

'The student should be able to feel that if she is in trouble she can go to her teacher to seek help.'

'The students should understand that they can come near the teacher but to a limit still there should be no walls between the teacher and the students'

The teachers explained the acceptable distance between the teachers and students:

'The teacher can't come close to the students. Other teachers will consider this against them. We have to keep our distance otherwise the students start meddling in personal matters. It can become very messy.'

'Personally when I walk in the corridors, I talk to my students and greet them, but I will not go any further and I don't even see this happening from other teachers in the school.'

The principals

The principals felt that students needed to be treated in a positive way but went on to say:

'The principal assistant is more in contact with the student as she is in charge of day to day duties of the school. My role is more supervisory.'

One principal said

'They keep breaking school rules by wearing inappropriate Sheila (head cover). Some would come to school wearing make up. This is a school and not a fashion show.'

'It is not always the students who are at fault. Some of the teachers don't know how to handle the students. They might be experts in the subject matter of the curriculum but when I go for a class visit I could feel the disengagement between the teacher and the students.'

'Some teachers don't tolerate any misbehaviour from the students and send them right away to the administration.'

While the principals, like the teachers, stressed on the point that they do not differentiate between students as all students are treated in the same way. They kept referring to two groups of students: The academically good students and the bad students. They kept labelling students as the good students, the lazy students and the naughty students.

4.3.2 Question 2: Do students share in school decision making.

All the adult participants without exception said that students do not share any school decision at any level.

The teachers

The teachers confirmed that students do not participate in school decision making.

'It is quite impossible to consider students as partners in decision making.'

'The students want to control the situation even in the way the lesson is conducted. They want to have an opinion. Teachers don't accept this so they are not interested in cultivating such skills in the students.'

'It is difficult for students to participate in school decision making. It is not just the students to blame. We are also to blame. We do not give them the chance. In our schools, the role of the students is minimal. Her role is to come to school, study and go home.'

'If I offer to consult them in a matter, then it is my decision to do so not theirs. Out side the class, they can say their opinions.'

Another teacher said:

'Their participation in real decision making is very limited. I have to admit that we really do not know how to use students' energy. In class it depends on the teacher, if she gives the students a strong role or not.'

A few teachers were of the opinion that only some students can be involved in school decision making. When they were prompted to describe those students, they said those students who are articulate and academically doing well in school. The reasonable and polite students could do that. One teacher presented a contradiction when she said:

'I feel that the rebellious and naughty students would be better at it(decision making). They are the ones who participate in all school activities. They are well known. They miss classes, they are disobedient.'

Yet at another point in the interview, she said:

'If we choose from the students for school decision making we would choose the disciplined and articulate students. The smart students are only concentrating on studying , they even refuse to participate in school activities. They say that they have tests and lessons they don't respond well. We cannot choose the naughty students as they would be a bad role model for the rest of the students.'

Teachers reported that they consult students in small matters of the class, like a test date or destination of a school trip.

'I do consult them and I let them decide. Sometimes I let them choose a test date of course I offer them two choices of dates that are suitable for me. They become happy that I listen to them'

'I consult them sometimes. It depends on my state of mind. Other times I will not tolerate even offer their opinions.'

Another teacher gave the impression that it was beyond her role to involve students. She feels that the teacher is forced to be a dictator without giving any reasons for that.

'I wish that I could give them more opportunity in decision making, but it must be something important. Sometimes the teacher has to be a dictator'

Principals

The principals like the teachers found it difficult even to see that students are capable of participating. The reasons they offered were variable. It started with the limited scope of school decision making. The adults put forward the argument that they are restricted by the rule and regulation of the MoEd. They considered themselves just complying with the will of the ministry. They also said that not all students are reasonable and logical enough. One principal offered her opinion by saying:

'Students as teenagers are controlled by their emotions and desires and it is difficult for them to think logically.'

While another principle said that:

'The hierarchical system of the school prevents such active role of students. The majority of the students cannot make decisions'

At another point, she said:

'I think out the 600 student we have 4 or 5 who definitely can participate. You see students come from different family environment. This helps some to have this ability. They have enough self-confidence and organised thinking. In reality, there is no participation except in extra-curricula activities'

4.3.2 Question 3: How do you come to know about the students concerns?

Teachers

One of the teachers said

'When I see that the students in one of the classes that I teach look miserable I ask what is the matter? The girls usually talk about their problems. They are very articulate. They express their opinions freely. Just tell them you look upset today and they will start talking: we have two tests on the same day. This teacher refused to postpone the test; they talk to you as if you are an angel coming to their rescue.'

The other teachers confirmed the same idea:

'If you converse with the students they will offer their opinions.'

'When I take free classes and ask the students what do you think of the teachers or the administration, They will talk , They offer their opinion , when they talk they feel better, I could take up the information they offer to the administration but I don't.'

'Supposedly there is a head teacher for each class she should be the closest teacher to the students she is the link between the student and the administration.'

One teacher said pensively:

'We should infiltrate student groups and talk to them but we don't. The best way to reach students is through dialogue. Not all teachers will talk to students, some will only shout.'

Principals

When the principals were asked about how they found out students' concerns, they said first through the social worker who the students go to when they have a problem with the teachers also through the teachers or directly from the students. The principals mentioned the proper channels of hearing students' complaints. They have a suggestion box where students can submit their problems and concerns. They also said if the problem a student has is of personal or family nature usually the social worker is responsible of dealing with it. The other principals repeated the same idea but added that personal face to face dialogue is the best as the students can talk and the adults can respond to the issues raised. One school set up a problem and answer page in its internet site where students from the school can enter and post a problem and the principal usually replies. One Principal pointed out:

'My office door is always open for students.'

'Through my experience I found out that the best way to reach the student is through dialogue'

One principle reported on an incident that happened to her, It was her practice to take free classes to talk with students on matters of the school, she said at one such occasion she gathered two classes in the auditorium, she said:

'To my surprise six students came to me and said that they were not interested in such discussion, I let them go, After all I cannot force them to listen or talk to me.'

The principals were aware of the students' concerns but they insisted that

'Most of the issues the students complain about are beyond our control.'

'They complain a lot about the curriculum.'

'They demand an open day but they don't want to do anything in it. This is not acceptable.'

4.4 Visual images

The study generated 62 drawings in the focus groups and the workshop. Five images were selected to represent the recurring themes that emerged from the drawings. The images were analysed according to Kress and van Leeuwen analysis as outlined in their book: *Reading images: grammar of visual design* (Appendix 3). As the book was not available, secondary sources were used. (Harrison, 2003. Oyama 2000, Forceville 1999). We have to take into consideration that not all the elements of analysis is applicable to all the drawings.

4.4.1 Image 1: Student voice

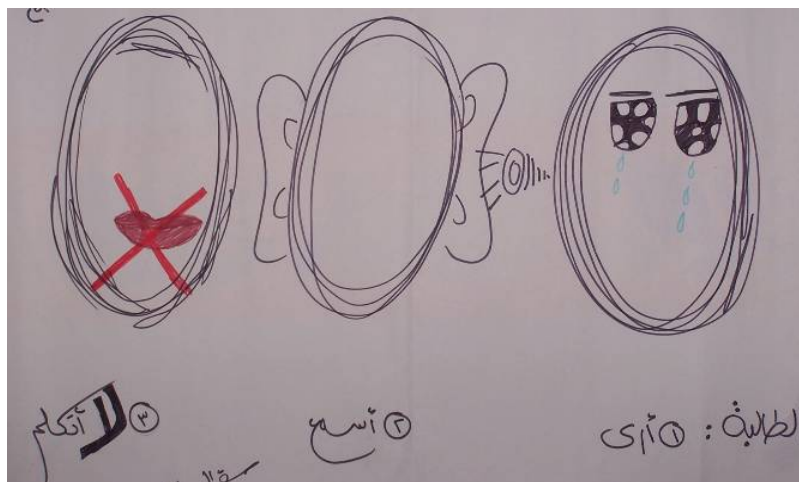


Figure 2: Student voice: Student: 1) I see 2) I hear 3) I do not talk

The drawing is conceptual in structure and symbolic in process. It presents three student faces in intimate persona distance from the viewer to achieve a high involvement with the student. The first face on the right have on main feature of crying eyes from it sees in school. The second face has very big ears. The third one only a mouth with a cross on it as the student is not allowed to speak.

4.4.2 Image two: Purpose of school



Figure 3: Social purpose of school

The girl: Mother! Father! Congratulate me. I graduated with honours

The parents: May Allah bless you my daughter.

A story is created in the drawing that represents the purpose of school. It is narrative in structure, actional in process by the presence of a vector. The student is stretching her arm to her parents holding secondary school certificate. Oblique angle: the participants are involved in the world of the image. The student occupies the left part of the image depicting a new ideal situation of her success in school while her parents occupy the domain of the familiar on the right side.

4.4.3 Image three: student relationship with other school members



Figure 4 student relationships with other school members

The drawing consists of five sketches that depict student relationship with other members of the school. Starting from the right the first is narrative reactional. It shows the students relationship with each other. The public distance is kept between the viewer and the students while, the horizontal angle is involving the viewer as if saying, “Look we have good relationship”

The second sketch on top is narrative reactional. The student gaze is downward while the teacher is looking at the student shouting “You...You...You”. Strong salience is created by the difference in size between the teacher and the student. The teacher is bigger. The student is keeping her distance.

The sketch at the bottom is also narrative but it is actional in nature as the teacher open arm is creating the vector of a strong relationship between the teacher and student. The teacher is showing care and asking the student “Tell me what is wrong”. Both of them have a smile on the faces. The viewer is involved by the horizontal angle of the teacher and student look. The social distance is again is in the public.

The next sketch shows the relationship between the student and an administrator. It is narrative reactional in process. The narrative is created by the eye line. The

student is looking down with tears filling her eyes, while the administrator is shouting at her. Again, it is in public distance domain. Strong salience is created by the difference in size between the administrator and the student.

In the last sketch, that shows the student relationship with the principal, the student is asking, “Where is the principal?” Strong salience is created by shrouding the principal in black and by drawing the principal larger in size than the student.. The student is on the right side of the image representing a given fact that the student really is missing the presence of the principal. The principal is on the left side posing a problem for the student as not being present for her.

4.4.4 Image four: Student Council



Figure 5 Student Council

The students are holding a sign that says: Student Council.

The words on the door: Danger. Entrance is prohibited. Smart students only

The drawing is conceptual in structure and classificatory in process. The door occupies the familiar on the right as for the students it is a given fact that Student Council is a private club for the smart student. The exclusivity materialise physically by the big lock on the door. Strong salience is created by placing the student in the foreground. What characterizes this picture is what is excluded than what is included. The general mass of students is not present in the drawing. Placing the students of the council on the left side of the image give us the

impression that they pose a problem to the rest of the students. Student council as a private club (the door) is for the smart students only.

4.4.5 Image five: The dream school



Figure 6 Dream School

This drawing symbolises the dream school. It is in the shape of an eye. The signs students are holding: Open day / dialogue / trips / Starbucks/ personal freedom. The arrow coming from the pupil of the eye: games / rest / no tests. The word on the up left: Life is sweet. The words on the bottom right: A vision for a future. Ambition with no limit. The words on the bottom left: keep us in your eyes.

This drawing is conceptual in structure and symbolic in process. It represents what the students want in school: a school without boundary. The shape of the eye works like a frame line that holds the students together. The eye -culturally- represent a special place where loved ones are cared for. A verse in Quran Comforts the Prophet: (For verily thou art in Our eyes) verse 48. Surat Tur. The combination of the visual and the textual build a strong argument for the student demand for care as this will help them realise their potential.

4.5 Summary

The findings were able to answer the research questions. What emerged from the findings is that all the participants confirmed that students do not participate in any meaningful way to school decision making. Students expressed their frustration

with the status quo of the school system. While the adults insisted that they reach out to students through different methods, students' insisted that they are not heard. They felt that their voice is of no value. They have quite a few concerns that they felt were not addressed by the adults in school.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The chapter is organized into three sections. The first section discusses the results of the study. The findings are discussed in relation to the conceptual framework. The second section outlines conclusions based on the findings. The final section presents the recommendation for further research and recommendations for the educational practice.

5.1 Discussion

This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students express their views and opinions in school?
2. How do students perceive their role in school decision making?

The aim of the research was to explore student voice in Dubai government schools for girls. 162 students participated in addition to six teachers and three principals. The data gathering methods consisted of focus group and a workshop for the students. The other participants were individually interviewed. Students' drawings in response to the research inquiries were analyzed according to Kress and van Leeuwen analysis of visual images. This study proposed to study student voice in the context of school as community as this reflect the exploratory nature of the research.

The findings indicate that the students in the schools under study have voice as a self expressing their opinions even if they feel they are not heard still they offer their voice in every chance they have. Students were not ready to be silenced, even though they know their voice did not go far. They articulate their needs and hold strong opinions on what transpires in school. Yet the school did not provide students with opportunities to participate in school decision making. Through this study, it was essential 'to give young people the voice to construct their own stories (Wyn and White, 1997:35). After all voice is to be heard first hand and through the

eyes of the students. There is obvious congruence between finding of this study and those found in the literature (Mitra 2005. Fielding 2001a . Levin 2000).

The findings from collected data will be viewed under three broad tied to the conceptual framework. These headings include: culture of care, governance and agency. The discussion will bring out the contrast and contradictions found between the adults’ and the students’ views.

5.1.1 Culture of care

The findings indicate that students feel like prisoners in school environment that does not provide them with what they need. The assumption arising from this study, that student voice and meaningful participation could only be achieved by creating supporting conditions from different school members.

	needs-based	Dialogue initiated
Students	Teachers do not show enough care.	No one listens to us. We demand dialogue sessions.
Teachers	Students are like our sisters.	The best way of knowing student problem is by dialogue.
Principals	My role is supervisory	The main method of knowing students concerns is dialogue.

Table 6 Culture of care elements

Needs-based

Needs based means that educator strive to understand what the students need in the educational context. As Noddings (2005a) said that, it is not enough that teachers say or believe that they care about the students. Table 6 shows the participants’ view of the issue of care.

The findings illuminated a mix baggage of how students reported the existence of care in the practice of the teachers. The student insisted that their need for care in not met by the teachers. The students report on such care is more important as they are the ones experiencing the care of the teachers or the lack of it.

The third sketch from image three in the findings chapter draws this as an interaction between the student and the teacher. The teacher is actively seeking to understand the student's need so she can respond to it appropriately. While the second sketch from the same drawing portrays a teacher shouting at a student. The focus group data showed that students need for relations characterised with trust and care was reflected in their response to issues about their relationships with the other school members.

The teachers also reported that while some teachers cared enough to listen to the students needs, some teachers resorted to shouting at the students. The principals also said that some teachers do not know how to deal with the students. Building positive relationship between teachers and students require commitment and mutual understanding from both parties. The findings indicated that such balance is shrouded by misconception about the students when they are judged as rebellious and difficult to handle. When students opinions are considered as a quality control method (Lodge 2005) to measure teachers' performance from the incidents students talked about, we saw that this method did not work as teachers resent the students and feel betrayed by them.

The principals in their supervisory role left it to the assistant principal and the teachers to cater directly with the needs of the students.

Students reported on ways which school dealt with issues of discipline, student conflict and teacher student conflict. Students as can be seen in (table 2) reported that they were punished in ways that are not acceptable to them but also has no educational value. It only builds up students' resentment towards the teachers and administration. It also reflected the school inability to deal with the students' behaviour. It builds up student teacher misconceptions and mistrust towards each other.

Two surprising findings of the study are how students considered themselves as equals to the teachers in a culture that should hold a great value to the teacher as teaching is revered the first job of a prophet. Another surprising finding-as most of school violence research concentrates on boys school- is that physical violence

between students exists in schools. The two finding point towards the changes of social values outside the school have an effect on the school.

Dialogue

The data exposed the basic assumptions and unconscious beliefs of both the students and the adults as they would use the same term but with different meaning. Table 6 depicts how all the three groups of participants recognise the importance of dialogue. While adults referred to dialogue as the best way of reaching students, students in every focus group and in responding to every question insisted on the absence of dialogue. Students felt that they are not heard.

What the adults considered dialogue the students did not see it that way. The teachers stressed the importance of dialogue, as we have seen in their response to the ways they used to know about students concerns. They used dialogue to listen to students complain about either other teachers or the administration. They did not mention it as a method to consider in evaluating their relationship with the students or their own performance. The principals did the same to enquire about teachers' performance. Usually they inform teachers about the feedback which leads to trouble for the students.

The adults understood dialogue as a way of knowing students concerns and an opportunity for them to vent out their frustration and feel better. The students wanted dialogue to bring real changes to the school system. They wanted something positive to come out of it. Once students are heard, they expect their opinions to be taken seriously. They expect administration and teachers to act upon their suggestions. If they feel nothing was done, a deep resentment builds up in them. Dialogue meant reaching a common language with which all school members can talk to another about the educational values of the school function and purpose. Dialogue is not just a communication with a sender, a message and a receiver, dialogue when it is a form of communication is multilayered and multi faceted. It is a communication two parties that get into come out of it changed. It changes their reality to a new one.

5.1.2. Governance

	Consultation	Proximity
Students	Our opinions are not taken seriously. Student Council does not represent us.	We need to have closer face to face encounter with teachers and principals.
Teacher	I consult student in test date and only when it is suitable for me.	Teachers need to keep their distance.
Principal	It is difficult to consult students. Students are controlled by their emotions	My role is supervisory. I am not in daily contact with the students.

Table7 Governance elements as seen by the students and the adults

Consultation

The students are considered the product of education so; they are hardly considered partners in their own education. They are not taken seriously. In fact, it is assumed that what ever is offered to them, whatever changes and improvement to the school system will be of benefit to them. While the adults want students to be active and participate, they want such activity and participation to conform to the ideal adult hold in their mind of what constitute a good student.

The examples in Table 7 illustrate the various points of view the participants hold about consulting students. The students in this study demanded real roles in classroom and in decisions about their school. This supports findings in other studies on student voice. The students complained that they are not consulted in any meaningful way. Even the student council as a formal body in the school structure was not used for the benefit of hearing student voice. The teachers are content in consulting the students in small matters like a date of a test. The principals did not even consider consulting students making the point that the students are not capable. Adults could not even imagine the possibilities students can offer as a group and individual of the knowledge they possessed and the skills they have. As Critchley (2003) reported in his study that the major set back for student voice is in the mindset of the adults. Contrary to how adults perceived the

students, findings of the study illustrated that they are capable of articulating their point of view in a logical and convincing manner. The students demonstrated their ability to theorise about school practice. We found them in the steps of the workshop demonstrating their ability to come up with a model view of a school. In the third step they offered very insightful list of obstacles against developing a dream school. They thought of finance as a main issue. They also were able to understand that the mindset of the people in charge is another main obstacle. Such issues are not easy to be aware of their importance. Adults take classes in management to learn about such issues.

While the adults kept describing the students as rebellious and difficult, the findings portray their demands of the educational system as reasonable. They were not seeking a revolution but more of mapping their terrain on the map of school. Through the whole study, they kept asking why things should be as they are. This supports what Levin (2000) considered as their need to understand the workings of the system and why things are done in certain way.

When adults consider students as disengaged and incapable, they miss out on some of the richest resources in enriching learning and teaching in school. Adults must recognize that student not by their deficiencies but as assets and experts in their own learning experience. Consulting student becomes a natural process that comes out of the adults belief not only in students' right to be involved in school decision but also that what they will offer could lead to a better school and more engagement of the students in their education.

Student consultation in class was rare and involved little matters. Teachers reported that sometimes they consulted students in small matters like the date of a test. The teachers confirmed that such small acts made the students content. At other times, the teachers felt they have to be in complete control. Such control only confirms what the students stated as having no role to play in decision making at the classroom level.

Out side the classroom no real opportunities are given to students to be consulted. On some occasions when students opinions were considered as a quality control method (Lodge 2005) to measure teachers performance from the incidents students

talked about we saw that this method doesn't work as teachers resent the students and feel betrayed by them. At other occasions, students were the source of information for school change yet students felt that no change came out of it. That built up the disengagement and mistrust in school system.

Student council could be a very good forum that help students share in school decision making yet the students were very critical of the student council as they reported that it did not represent the majority of the students (Table 7). Its function was vague to them. They also reported that members of the student council served the school agenda and not the students'.

Proximity

Proximity refers to relationship created by the space between school members. How distance is created between them. Proximity was an issue that was not very obvious until you closely hear what students were saying and asking for. This study produced through the words and drawing of the students interviewed, strong indication that the students needed that closeness to other school members.

In looking at Table 7 we see the contrasting view of the participants of what is acceptable distance between them. The students asked for more closeness to the other school members. They were saying that they do not know the principal and sometimes other members of the administration. In the first few focus groups, it was taken at face value. Later as more sessions were conducted, it became more plausible to understand it as a desire to have a better relationship and nearness. When the students were asked about it, they confirmed that this is what they meant. This reflects the local accepted way of governance. The sheikh is always available and present amongst the people responding to their needs instantly. The late Sheikh Zayed (the first President of UAE) pictures kissing a child or being present at a wedding of a commoner was not done for political gains or to win voting campaigns. It is part of being close to the people.

The teacher's proximity to the student was a controversial issue. The teachers felt a need for it, yet the school culture prohibited making use of it to cater to the

students needs as teachers felt that coming closer to students will make the students take advantage of it and start nosing around personal matters.

As for the principals, they felt that they role is more supervisory and without knowing kept their distance from the students. They could have noticed what works in how they are governed and copied it. The issue of time can be a key factor in getting closer to students. Making time for them should be an issue worth considering in the principal’s hectic schedule.

5.1.3. Agency

Participants	Power	Responsibility & Ownership
Students	We do not like all the school rules. We know how to rebel against them	Teachers and Administration are responsible for all our concerns. We feel helpless and controlled.
Teachers	We need to be in control	We wish that students showed more motivation and initiation.
Principals	The students have to follow the rules of the school	Very few students have the logic or can be responsible

Table8 Agency elements as seen by the students and the adults

The idea of agency is that students are active agents in the social life of the school. They construct meaning out of their diverse experiences. They are able to explore the boundaries of existing situation in school, and to communicate a desire in creating a more balanced and meaningful relationship with the other members in school, how ever realising those desires as school changes is no easy task.

Power

Power is an issue that covers a large area in the school map. The organisation of school from kindergarten to secondary grades, is the site children experience power. Teachers, administrative staff and the principal represent power.

Adults and students get into power struggles to prove their presence (Table 8). Students' comments clearly indicate that they experience a lack of any control or influence over how school is and how it is operated. Thus they see themselves confronting rules and regulation around dress and behaviour code that they see as meaningless, arbitrary, unfair and against their expression of their individuality.

Students understood and realize that they have power (Table 8). They were able to use different ways of showing their resistance to adult power and authority. Resistance was a strategy students used to establish their power and set boundaries between them and the teachers. Resistance became a medium of student voice as a self-expression. In the finding the adults expressed a need to manage students conduct but did not know how to handle the students which lead to harsh rule setting and punishment.

In the class, the teachers tried to control the students by controlling the rules of the classroom. They controlled how and when students could voice their opinions. Sometimes the teachers admitted this depended on their personal mood and temperament. This only makes the student complain more and resist.

Outside the classroom the adults tried to control students by imposing rules that the student do not accept. Forcing students to wear certain uniform and certain Sheila (head cover) drives students to break them. It is easier to break rules that you feel you did not help in formulating.

Responsibility & Ownership

Table 8 illustrates the issue of responsibility and ownership as perceived by the participants. Students showed a lack of agency and responsibilities towards their role in school. They could not imagine themselves as agents of change. They pointed fingers to other members of the school community as responsible even though they see themselves as part of the problem. Wyn and White (1997:20) point out that

'The playing out of the agency is always undertaken within the context of structural settings and parameters. What gives any particular structural

instance of agency its social content is the institutional and cultural framework within which it is exercised'

For this study it could be interpreted that lack of agency or instances of agency is hindered by institutional and cultural context of the school. If the adults do not give student enough space to have such instances then student would only feel powerless and they would not put themselves into the responsibility position.

Students' lack of ownership could possibly be explained as a result of the school context they live in. Students feel education is done to them the adults reiterated the idea that the students are expected to come to school study and go home. This strips students from feeling any responsibility towards their own educational goals.

This lends them to the blaming game, everyone and everything is responsible for their problems which leads them to seek being saved also by someone else. All positive action they felt they could do was complain to the minister or write a letter, they could not see themselves as possible active agents of change on their own life and education.

In all issues they raised they identify the problems but cannot position themselves taking an active part towards a solution after all they are the product of the system they in.

5.2. Conclusions

This study provided a glimpse at student voice in Dubai government schools for girls. The school involved in the study did not promote student participation in school decision making in any meaningful way. The students have no role in school decision making. The findings of the study indicate that student voice as self expression is present but as a school practise it is not. Student felt that they are not heard.

The school as community hold an important key to building a strong student voice.

Student relationship with other school community members was not always positive. It is built on misunderstandings and misconceptions around each others. Is it not time that educators started listening to student voice with open mind and accepting souls? No matter how they view students and no matter how difficult they can be. It is only natural that an Emarati student in the 21st century would be different than an image that educators have in their mind.

The use of focus group as a method to listen to student voice in this study proved to be very effective. Students felt free to express their opinions. . What was original about the study is the use of visual images as data collecting method. The students drawing gave student voice a depth that transcends words. The conceptual framework position students as responsible members as student voice is not suggested as an entitlement but more of a right that has a responsibility attached to it.

5.3. Recommendations

5.3.1 Recommendation for future research

This research while offering glimpses at student voice, has by no means attempted to provide a comprehensive portrait of secondary school student life. In doing so, it paves the way towards a research area that has never been trodden. In this geographical area there is plenty of scope for future research, and the findings of this research should stimulate more research in Emarati student voice.

It is recommended that research build on students' experience to initiate studies in which students research school systems and work on specific solution for their own school instead of relying on others. Researching student voice can assist in developing better understanding as to what works for the students. As Oldfather (1995:131) points out: 'Students are experts on their own perceptions and experiences as learners.'

One of the areas that need to be addressed by research is the student teacher relationship. The study exposed part of it, but more work should be done to understand it better.

Violence in girls' school is another area that needs to be researched as the students kept referring to incidents of verbal fights between students that turned into physical fights.

5.3.2 Recommendation for Schools

The study recommends the need for a significant shift towards students' participation in school context in UAE (Dubai). Students' voice need to be recognized as of value for school growth and improvement. Participation of student in school decision-making should be given a priority, while training and supporting student to play such a role. It is also of significant value to student educational experience within the context of building their identity as UAE citizens.

It is recommended that educators address students' needs by setting up regular dialogue session. The whole school system has to undergo major reforms to address the above issues. Student voice offered the researcher an understanding of how student perceive their experience in school. Such insights could help teachers understand what the conditions that help students learn better are.

Attitudes and belief system of educators appear to account for success or failure of any student voice. No practice can be applied or pushed without the consent and total participation of teachers. Any student voice effort should be a co joined enterprise between the students and the teachers. The administration should only provide a supporting role as building the relationship between the teachers and the students is more important than controlling the teaching process. After all, education is the by-product of such a relationship.

Educators should try to understand and accept students' perspectives about school, while making use of it to promote learning by devising a school process that caters for the needs of the students. A positive school environment should help promote student voice in the classroom and outside it.

Schools could elicit student voice through focus groups and drawings to name but a few available ways of reaching out to students.

It is recommended that mending teacher-student relationship is a starting point. People work better when they have positive feeling towards each other.

School as community was very helpful in understanding and making meaning of the data. It also can be a model that schools could use to build a strong school community by addressing the three main proposed elements of culture of care, governance and agency.

5.4. Summary

This study was an attempt to understand Emarati student voice in Dubai government school for girls. The findings indicated that students did not participate in school decision making. Students expressed their frustration with the present school system and longed for one that gave them bigger roles to play.

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Appendix A

Convention on the rights of the child consists of 52 articles. Article 12 and 13 outline children's right to express their views

Article 12

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

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 13

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

(a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or

(b) For the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals.

Appendix B

Focus group session evaluation

The total numbers of students participating was 162 but only 116 returned the evaluation sheet. It was their choice to participate or not.

	fair	good	excellent	Total
The idea	7	9	100	116
The period of the focus group	53	58	5	116
orally	2	19	95	116
In writing	6	23	78	116
In drawing	3	31	82	116
The Facilitator	0	8	108	116
The questions asked		16	100	116

Appendix C

Visual Images Analysis

The drawings of the students were analysed using Kress and van Leeuwen analysis. Three main areas of analysis are provided in the next tables.

Structure	Process
Narrative: Allow viewers to create a story. A vector is present	Action: Narrative is created by vectors that can be bodies limbs . tools, road est.
	Reactional : Narrative created by eye line to act like vector
Conceptual: Does not include vector . R.P.(Represented Participant) are group together to represent the concept	Classificatory: R. Ps are part of an exclusive group.
	Analytical : R.P represented in terms of a ‘ part-whole’ structure. Whole is the carrier , parts are attributes
	Symbolic : R are Important for what they mean .

Interpersonal Meaning: Interpersonal meaning is created by the representation of relations between the viewer and the image viewed : this is accomplished by : perspective (vertical or horizontal) and social distance		
Horizontal Angle	Vertical Angle	Social Distance
Frontal : looking at viewer straight in the eye . (one of us feeling) ablique :R.P are not look at the viwer	High angle : R.P looking up Medium angle : Horizontally equal power Low angle. Looking up	Intimate personal close personal far personal Close social Far social Public distance A group of whole figures
Interpersonal Meaning: Interpersonal meaning is created by the representation of relations between the viewer and the image viewed : this is accomplished by : perspective (vertical or horizontal) and social distance		
Horizontal Angle	Vertical Angle	Social Distance
Frontal : looking at viewer straight in the eye . (one of us feeling) ablique :R.P are not look at the viwer	High angle : R.P looking up Medium angle : Horizontally equal power Low angle. Looking up	Intimate personal close personal far personal Close social Far social Public distance A group of whole figures

Composition Metafunction	
Information value Place of RP the image	
<p>up Ideal: What might be</p> <p>Left New: an issue or a problem</p> <p>right Given: familiar</p> <p>Central: R.P are nucleus</p> <p>down Factual: practical</p> <p>Note: taking into account right to left orientation of Arabic language, the vertical line has been flipped to reflect that.</p>	
Salience	Size Sharpness of focus Tonal contrast Color contrast creates more salienc Foreground Greater salienc than Background
Capturing attention	
Framing	Framelines : lines within the image that divide R.P or hold them together Pectoral Framing
Framing affect how P R are connected or separate	

Appendix E

The study has become a map of explored land the researcher cannot stand outside it. It shapes the researcher as much as she shapes it. The question that keeps repeating inside me is where is your position? Where is your space? We all carry our own package of biases whether we acknowledge them or not or even if we are aware of them or not.

Once I stepped into the first focus group session I felt something changed in me. I responded to the participants in ways I couldn't have thought were possible. A lot of emotions and thoughts were whirling inside. My body reacted faster than my mind. I could feel my cheeks becoming flushed and I could feel sweat forming at my back. It's a reaction that I did not expect or could comprehend at that moment. It threw me into a mental turmoil trying to understand the relationship between me as a researcher and the research. It had to do with where a researcher positions herself from the study. It is not only connected to biases. The stream of words coming out of their mouths and the very descriptive cartoons made me wonder, what am I doing here? , why? I have years of teaching experience and experience in conducting training workshops and dialogue sessions for students and still it was new to me as the question of where would I position myself as a researcher . Does listening to students and giving them the chance to talk would be a betrayal to the school staff who invited me in their school? There is nothing objective about research. Doing individual interviews is different. There are more balanced and there are a flow to them where you don't risk getting too involved. Focus group turned out to be different. The energy of what am I risking by being here raising questions on face of it looked innocent enough, but .. I came out of the first focus group session feeling that I cannot report what they were saying as it was too honest , too strong and raw.

During the fieldwork period, I came to peace with what was offered by the students, accepting that this is their reality, I had no right to deny it or find explanation to it. When I listen to my voice in the last focus groups and also in the workshop, I could feel myself taking the back seat and letting the student drive the

research. The same set of questions were offered to the adults in the study to balance what students reported and to create the multiple realities lived in school.