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Critiquing the school community: a qualitative study of children's conceptualizations of their school

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Schools are traditionally seen as responsible for the educational outcomes of our children. However, schools also play an important role in the development of aspects such as self efficacy, participation, competence and self-determination. As schools are often run as societies rather than communities, they offer little opportunity for these attributes (self efficacy, participation, competence and self-determination) to develop. Forty-six children aged from nine to 12 years were interviewed to ascertain their conceptualizations of the school community. The children define their school in terms of people, places for activities and interaction, a place for safety, cooperation, influence and functionality. The responses closely align to the adult conceptualizations of sense of community as purported by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Implications of this research suggest that children can and should have an integral role in designing a curriculum and systems relevant to the school context if we are at all concerned with their psychological wellness.

Introduction

As children progress through early to middle childhood the amount of time they spend outside the family home engaged in a range of formal and informal activities increases. Formal schooling, which in Australia usually commences in the year that the child turns six years of age, is one of the entities that occupies a large proportion of children's out-of-home time. Children spend at least six hours per day in the average primary school. Research has recognized that the educational system has one of the most sustained contacts with children and has recognized the importance of understanding the impact of schools on children (Wang et al. 1997; Werner 2000). Educational research documents our understandings of how school impacts on cognitive, social, behavioral and moral development of the child. Further to this LaGrange (2004) argues that in the lives of disadvantaged children schools are an important change agent. This article explores primary-school-aged children's conceptualizations of their school community with a view to broadening our understanding of the school as a system, from the child's perspective.

The importance of belonging in school

Sense of belonging is an intrinsic human need (Maslow 1968), which can be defined as 'a sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others ... and of feeling oneself to be an important part of ... life and activity...' (Goodenow 1993, 25). Sense of belonging is proposed as a necessary antecedent to successful education for a number of reasons (Schmuck & Schmuck 1992; Beck & Malley 1998). First, students spend a substantial portion of their time at school and participating in school-related activities (Edwards 1995; Battistich et al. 1997). Second, peer relationships become more important with age (Cauce 1986), and intimacy with peers increases markedly from middle childhood to adolescence (Berndt 1982). Third, belonging is associated with numerous positive effects: liking school, respect for teachers, educational aspirations, self-esteem, cooperative learning, making friends, attendance and retention rates, participation and academic success (Zeichner 1980; Weiner 1990; Schmuck & Schmuck 1992; Edwards 1995; Battistich et al. 1997; Royal & Rossi 1997). Fourth, common school stresses, such as personal safety (Weldy 1995), can be minimized by a caring and responsive school environment (Schumaker 1998). Finally, children's feelings of belonging within their schools, families and communities are essential for mental health (Routt 1996).

With a more mobile society, increases in parental working hours and the change in the structure of the 'nuclear' family, traditional vehicles of belonging to communities are less relevant (Beck & Malley 1998). It is argued that children who do not feel a sense of belonging to their families, schools or

communities may acquire or seek a sense of belonging as a member of an antisocial group (Cotton 1996; Baker et al. 1997; Beck & Malley 1998). Therefore for children, feelings of alienation within the wider community equate to feelings of not belonging in school (Edwards 1995). Students who feel isolated are more likely to fail at school (Beck & Malley 1998). The onus is on schools to create a caring community to foster a sense of belonging (Wehlage 1989; Schaps & Solomon 1997).

School as a community

A community is an 'environment characterized by mutual support and concern, and collaborative work and decision-making' (Battistich et al. 1997, 143). Sense of community (SoC) includes membership (including a sense of belonging), participation and influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and a shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis 1986). According to Puddifoot (1996), there is widespread agreement concerning the importance of community as a protective factor. As McMillan and Chavis (1986) assert, 'a healthy community system is one that can resist social, psychological, and physiological problems, in addition to enabling individuals and their collectivity to grow to their maximum potential' (p. 338). Schools have been conceptualized as communities in a number of different ways.

Baker et al. (1997) proposed school as a learning community that shares values and ideals in the pursuit of a common goal. Battistich et al. (1997) have described schools as communities that provide a framework for educational practice and reform. Typically schools do not prioritize the enhancement of student sense of belonging. Baker et al. (1997) advocate a relational approach to school reform via 'improving the social context at school so that caring connections to others and to meaningful academic work is fostered' (p. 587). Such community oriented schools focus on the quality of the relationships between students, teachers, parents and the wider community, as well as on educational achievement, and are structured to promote a sense of belonging and commitment to achieve academic goals. Therefore these authors conceptualize the school community holistically where the focus on relationships within the school is as important as educational achievements. Focusing on creating a caring school community can achieve this goal.

Risks are often embedded within the school culture (Baker et al. 1997). Fine (1990) proposed that public schools should be moral communities based on fair and equitable access to education and the reallocation of community resources (e.g. taxes) for the education of others. However, she found exclusion quite apparent in public schools. Students of minority groups, low-income backgrounds and female students are more likely to believe they deserve a less comprehensive education because of their ethnicity, economic status and gender. Society teaches them that their exclusion from a privileged education is justifiable (Fine 1990). This can be illustrated through the concepts of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) (Tonnies 1957). Schools are often structured formal organizations that emphasize individual achievement, competition and rule abiding. Both students and teachers perceive feelings of distrust, a lack of respect and minimal personal connectedness to others in the school. Many schools and schooling systems exacerbate the risks by not adequately meeting the psychological needs of their students, leading to diminished learning, alienation and attrition. This is an illustration of *Gesellschaft* as the school is representing a mini-society. On the other hand, Baker et al. (1997) concluded that school reform should focus on the underlying problem of an uncaring school environment, rather than on at-risk students and their learning and/or behavioral difficulties, to create meaningful relationships within a caring school community (*Gemeinschaft*).

Authors such as Baker et al. (1997), Battistich et al. (1997) and Fine (1990) have all referred to what schools *should* be in terms of learning, relational and moral communities. These are characteristics of communities as they focus on connectedness and meeting the needs of the collective. Inherent in much education research and practice is the assumption that schools are communities. However, on examination it is evident that schools are practicing as societies. They tend to focus on individual student achievement from a deficit model. For example, much research focuses on sense of

belonging where the onus is on the individual student to fit in and if he/she does not he/she is blamed for it. Rather, we suggest a conceptualization of schools as communities that encourage participation from all children, where children have the opportunity for developing self-efficacy, competence, self-determination, and where they can gain access to important resources, all important for positive mental health and well-being at the individual and collective level (Prilleltensky & Nelson 2000: Prilleltensky et al. 2001).

As a result, the body of research needs to alter its focus from examining sense of belonging to sense of community. Sense of belonging is an individual characteristic while sense of community is a holistic concept that encompasses the whole system and thus examines *Gemeinschaft*. In addition, children are unlikely to be involved in the process of developing the conceptualization of the school as a system. More often, they are the recipients of programs developed for them yet without their involvement. However, we know that children are able to conceptualize and communicate their understanding of community and sense of community (Pooley et al. 2002). Therefore, the present study aims to explore children's conceptualizations of their school community.

Method

Design

The present research adopted a qualitative approach consistent with focused conceptual development (Henwood & Pidgeon 1995) where through a series of scoping interview with primary school- aged children the specific conceptual framework for the study emerged. This is also consistent with our previous study on children's SoC (Pooley et al. 2002).

Participants

The participants were 46 children aged between nine and 12 years ($M = 10.8$), comprising 25 girls and 21 boys. The children were recruited from five primary schools in Western Australia. These primary schools were contained within the same educational jurisdiction, and were of similar size and background. The Early Development Index (EDI) developed in Canada in 1999 was adopted for use by the Western Australian Health Department (Hart et al. 2003). The EDI is an index that reflects the environment in which children are raised. The schools participating in this project were all in an educational district that has been classified as low in social competence, language and cognitive development, with less than 50% of parents completing secondary schooling. Approximately 15% of families in the area are from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds (CALD). These schools were involved in the study as part of an ongoing research program with the authors. The children varied in the length of time they had been enrolled in their current school, ranging from attending the school since their formal education began, to two terms with the school.

Interviewers

The interviewers were eight female students ranging from 25 to 45 years who were completing their postgraduate psychology program. They volunteered to participate as interviewers and were trained by three of the authors experienced in interviewing children. Issues, problems, ethics and techniques for working with children were discussed as part of the training.

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule emerged from the work of Chipuer et al. (1999) and a series of scoping interviews with 10 children aged nine to 12 years. This pilot study indicated that children of this age understand the concept of community, which supports previous research (see Pooley et al. 2002). This pilot study also indicated the clarity, content and face validity of the schedule for children aged nine to 12 years. Consistent with a funneling technique questions were initially more general in nature and then gradually became more specific (Smith 1995). An example of a more general

question is 'Tell me about your school community.' These questions were used to probe the children's understanding of their school community using a conversational technique (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998). This style was utilized to minimize the power differential between the interviewer and child to minimize its effect on the process and subsequent outcome of interviewing children.

Procedure

As previously mentioned, the particular schools were chosen as they are in the same locality as the university. In addition, the authors are engaged in a local research program that includes these primary schools. The researchers wanted a range of perspectives from children aged between nine and 12 years old. Informed consent was obtained from the school principal. The parents and children of these year groups were approached by the principal to ascertain their willingness to participate in the research. All parents and children received an information letter outlining the nature of the research. The parents or legal guardians and their children were required to sign a consent form. This was obtained by informing them that each interview would take approximately 20 minutes and would be audiotaped and later transcribed by the interviewer. Each interview occurred individually in a room provided by the school. The interviewers allowed time to build rapport with each child in line with the conversation style of the interviews. It was explained to the children that the purpose of the conversation was to find out what children of their age think about their school community. They were assured of confidentiality and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. After completion of the interview, each child was thanked for his or her participation. All interviewers attended debriefing sessions with three of the four authors to ensure all data and field notes were obtained (Creswell 1998).

Analysis and results

Guided by Creswell's process for analyzing qualitative data (1998) the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then read individually by each author, during which they noted their biases and reactions. The authors also kept a journal in which memos and notes were recorded as this formed part of the audit trail (Nagy & Viney 1994). Initially a thematic content analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994) was conducted for each of the eight questions (see Appendix A) in order to determine the concepts that underpinned children's understanding of their school as a community. The transcripts were not analyzed by school, gender, age or other sociodemographic characteristics as the authors were interested in whether these children could conceptualize their school as a community. Codes were then developed and identified in the transcript by locating words used by the participant, as well as the references to individuals that the participant makes most frequently and the broader ideas they express (Berg 2001). The codes were then grouped into common or recurring themes (Berg 2001). After analysis, all transcripts were compared and common and divergent themes were isolated (Berg 2001). These themes were then considered in terms of the exploratory research being conducted (Berg 2001).

Inclusion of all authors in the analysis of the data capitalizes on the method of investigator triangulation (Tindall, 1994), thereby reflecting the multiple viewpoints available in understanding the data. Thus the themes that emerged from the analysis will be presented incorporating qualifying statements from participants. The themes were People; Places for activities/interaction; Safety; Cooperation; Influence; and Functionality.

People

The largest theme to emerge was around People, that is, the most important and frequently mentioned people were their friends, teachers and the principal. The wider community was identified in the children's references to other parents and individuals in the wider community. These responses can be likened to the concentric circle of an ecological framework, with an emphasis on the micro

system that children have most contact with (Bronfenbrenner 1989), whereby the children themselves articulate the multiple influences on their experiences and development. It was noted that girls were more likely to focus on people than boys. In general the focus was on the positive aspects of people.

We've got great teachers and a nice principal ... and over the years that I have been here, since like two years of pre-primary and up I've just had really nice teachers. (Female, aged 11)

Well I know lots of people in my school community and most of my friends are from within the school and I know my mum knows lots of people from the school community as well. (Female, aged 12)

The children thought about people in two dimensions, 'friendly and unfriendly' and 'good and bad'. The majority of children concluded that the people in their school were mostly friendly and good.

Yes, I reckon we've got a good bunch of people, because the little kids are real friendly. I don't think we've got any bad people. (Male, aged 12)

On the whole, they had an understanding that some people were 'well' or 'badly' behaved. Good people were characterized as friendly and caring whereas bad people were associated with bullying, and were not regarded as friends. Being bad was also associated with 'big kids' (adolescents as opposed to the little kids their own age) and bad behaviors/acts are in turn typified by vandalism.

Some of the kids reckon they rule the whole school. They reckon they are the boss of it and they reckon they can tell everybody what to do just because they are year sevens. (Male, aged 11)

I reckon it's bad when you come to school one day and once there was soap rubbed on the stage and our door was smashed ... our glass door to get in. There's sometimes been windows smashed by teenagers. It's mostly teenagers and like graffiti sometimes. (Male, aged 11)

The overall feeling was that there were a few badly behaved people around but most of them were okay.

Good friends sometimes I depend on some people they usually depend on me for the last few days to get a football out [out of the sports room]. (Male, aged 12)

They drew parallels between people in the school and familial relationships, describing the school as 'one big family'.

Most of the people know each other and most of the people enjoy being here in this community, and most of the people know each other. (Female, aged 12)

Well all the people are all friendly and like one big family sort of thing. (Female, aged 11)

Places

The next theme to emerge was that of Places. However, the children do not talk of places as geographic locations in and of themselves, but refer to places where activities and interaction, both formal and informal, can occur. Their meaning, therefore, is more functional than geographic in nature. Formal activities associated with places can be further divided into 'formal compulsory' and 'formal non-compulsory' school-sanctioned or -initiated activities. Formal compulsory activities we have defined as school-sanctioned or -initiated activities that children are required to attend (e.g. assemblies and activities associated with formal curriculum learning).

We've got good facilities, we've got a good library for books and learning and all that stuff. (Female, aged 11)

Formal non-compulsory we have defined as school-sanctioned or -initiated activities, where children can exercise their choice as to whether they engage with these or not (interschool sports, music student council, choir, school band, some school excursions).

The teachers do fun stuff with us like playing sport or going on excursions. We just had the sports carnival, so that's fun. We had the interschool sports last term. (Female, aged 11)

Informal activities include 'play' and 'fun stuff' and appear to be initiated by the children.

With my friends I just muck around and play games and all that. (Female, aged 12)

Play chasey, go down to the playground and play. (Female, aged 11)

The informal activities were described as fun and included activities highlighted as 'good' things about their school community. They elaborated on the nature of the informal activities such as playing, talking and informal sport. However, whereas the formal activities are largely confined to the school environment, the informal activities seem to provide a link between the school environment and the outside community environment, typified by children playing with each other after school or at the weekend.

Well at lunchtime and recess like I play with them, and sometimes after school and sometimes on weekends and holidays and we just go to the movies or down the park or play at each other's houses. (Female, aged 12)

I play stuff with them at lunchtime and like on the weekends, I go around their house and everything. (Male, aged 11)

There are no strong clear messages about 'bad' things associated with the places. The examples that the children cite appear to be associated with malfunctioning equipment (e.g. computer), perceived deficits in numbers of library books or the quality of play equipment.

Oh yes, computers. Excuse my French, very crap. No good games on them, no good programs that you are allowed to go through. They are pretty slow machines. (Male, aged 12)

Safety

The third theme to emerge concerned the issue or concept of Safety. Children's responses suggested that they were aware of safety in a number of dimensions ranging from their own immediate personal safety to safety in the school and outside-school environment. They felt safe outside the school because of safety houses (identified safehouses for children in close proximity to the school). However, the children indicated that they felt a sense of emotional and physical safety within the school environment.

I feel good about my school community because I know that I'm safe around here and I know all the places I need to go and where everything is, so I can't get lost ... if I'm at school I know where I am. (Male, aged 11)

Children elaborated on personal safety matters when they described concerns about incidents of bullying and vandalism to the school environment. This illustrates that they are aware of the occurrence of environmental vandalism and its impact on the school.

Some of the kids reckon they rule the whole school. They reckon they are the bosses of it, and they reckon they tell everybody what to do just because they are Year 7s. (Male, aged 11)

Well, sometimes after the weekend, you come back and there's glass all over the floor and beer bottles and there's rubbish around the school and graffiti. I feel bad because everybody's put a lot of effort into it and just say if you come back and it's all wrecked like that. (Female, aged 10)

Cooperation

Under the theme of Cooperation there appeared to be an emphasis on the collective well-being. The emphasis on interaction described how individuals worked together to problem-solve and to achieve things by mutual cooperation. The notion of older children mentoring younger children was also mentioned. This is reminiscent of the manner of cultural transmission of knowledge and experience in a community.

They have sports carnivals and things. The older kids get the younger ones into cheering and like they come and watch the younger carnival. They work as teams. (Female, aged 11)

All the people joining together, and if you had a group of kids who didn't really care, I don't think it would be all that good and we wouldn't get what we wanted. I think like that kids care – it makes it better. (Male, aged 12)

Influence

The theme of influence within the school community reflects children's understanding of how to get things done or changed. The children can clearly articulate a number of avenues to assert their influence. The most mentioned avenues were teachers (including the principal) and the student council, although some mention was also made of friends, parents and the local council. A small number of participants did not think there was anything that desperately needed changing or could not effect change. In terms of how the children could effect change responses included writing a letter, doing up posters, voting and using the public address system within the school. Clearly the children understand the process of how to effect change, the lines of communication and what is appropriate within the different roles in the process, such as the principal's role, the student council's role, the teacher's role and their own role.

If it was something little, you'd ask a friend or something. (Male, aged 10)

Like say if you need something and it's money, you could ask if you could do a fundraising thing with the prefects. (Male, aged 11)

Well, student councilors, they talk with our deputy principal, and they discuss issues and you can have them brought up at the assembly and they come back and discuss them and they come back and decide about it, so you can just come and tell the deputy or a councilor and they will discuss it at their meetings, because they have one every Thursday lunchtime. (Female, aged 12)

Functionality

This theme exemplifies the iterative nature of the children's understanding of the school community. The facilities within the school, such as the oval, canteen and library, are an important aspect of what makes the school a community but they do not stand alone. Important to children's understanding of their school is the perception that a functional school community works together to provide these facilities, which in turn helps define the school community. In this sense the school community is functional. The school community functions to provide facilities, which in turn become part of the community.

There's lots of sports equipment and we've recently, about two months ago, we were in the Jump Rope for Heart to raise money for people. Some money came back and we had some money to spend on the class and after this year's finished it goes into the sports shed. (Male, aged 11)

The children also emphasized the role of people being united to achieve things together, having a common purpose, and thus stressing the collectivity of the school community.

Discussion

The above results suggest that the children who participated in this research were able to conceptualize their school as a community, and are able to place their school within the broader context of the wider community. They define their school community in terms of people, places for activities and interaction, and a place of safety. The people who are central to their experience of the school community are their peers, teachers and the principal. The places for activities and interaction, provided by the school, mediate the relational aspect of the school community and thus enhance the relationships with the significant people and their sense of safety, in their school community.

In terms of what makes a school a community the children emphasized cooperation, influence and the functionality of the school. These children see their school in a concrete way, as a place where their experience of exchange with people and places is through activities/interactions mediated within the school system. These were activities that had a common purpose, were for the collective good and emphasized cooperation and influence. It is these that characterized functionality.

Pooley et al. (2002) demonstrated that children can think concretely about their communities. However, the children's conceptualizations of their communities were mostly concrete and related to their developmental stage. The current study indicates that children can think concretely but also abstractly about a community that is more salient, such as their school. Through talking about the local council, parents and seeing school friends outside school hours they are able to identify school as a part of their wider community.

Sense of school community in children

Schools provide children with opportunities to experience, to connect with other individuals, to feel integrated, to feel good, to develop competences as a child in a community and, importantly, the school community provides children with a place to learn about their school community and about the processes of school community. In this respect these children are socialized to their school as a community.

Consistent with our conceptualization of schools as communities, the children's responses closely aligned with McMillan and Chavis's (1986) SoC model. The children talked about belonging and membership within their school but aspects of influence, fulfillment of the needs of the collective and functionality were also as important. In sum, the four components of the theory proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) applied to the children's conceptualization of their school community.

Implications

By focusing on people and structure, these children were able to locate themselves within the schools collective and thus schools are important in developing an SoC. The theme of 'functionality' has implications for the types of facilities and activities provided by the school as schools can support children in all these ways to varying degrees. For example, activities or clubs outside school hours (after school), such as team sports and music clubs, may need to be considered as they also facilitate connection to the school environment (Bateman 2002). For children in Western Australia connection to local school communities could be strengthened through primary schools that can facilitate and locate sports at these local primary schools.

A further implication from the present study is in the area of designing educational curricula and programs. Typically programs focus at the individual and interpersonal levels. Within a holistic framework the collective level is as important as the individual and relational levels in determining wellness (Prilleltensky & Nelson 2000). Collective wellness stems from recognition of our role as

active citizens. It has been suggested that for children this can be achieved by access to valued resources, participation and self-determination, and competence and self-efficacy (Prilleltensky et al. 2001). The findings of the present study support Pooley et al. (2002) in suggesting that children should be introduced to these aspects of collective wellness much earlier than is currently the case and it would seem that the school community is the ideal context. Therefore schools in Western Australia could foster connections to communities through family and community with targeted programs like *MindMatters*, which aims to develop a framework and resources around mental health promotion through the 'Health Promoting School' concept. Currently this has been developed and implemented in a number of educational systems in Australia, the United States, Ireland, Germany and Switzerland but only at the secondary level. It provides a framework for understanding and delivering the concept and importance of mental health in schools, families and communities (Mullett et al. 2004). The concept of collective wellness could also benefit from a similar focus and process.

From a young age, children can position themselves as citizens in the school community and they are to locate themselves and the school community in the wider collective. A significant implication is that there is very little opportunity for children to have a voice in terms of their own education system. Much of the research argues that the education system, in its entirety, has a substantial impact on the psychological and educational attainment of children yet they are not involved in its development. By giving children a voice we provide a counter to the 'adult-centric' discourse that dominates this area (Prilleltensky et al. 2001, 145). In terms of the wellness framework schools are one context where participation and self-determination may be enacted (Prilleltensky et al. 2001). The current study indicates that the SoC framework may be a useful backdrop to school curriculum and development as well as for future research and practice.

Overall, the findings suggest that children are able to articulate their understanding of their school community. Most importantly children focus on people and the functionality of their relationships with these people. This most probably reflects the attachments children form within their school micro-system. A primary-school-aged child's focus at this stage of the lifespan is on relationships with others embedded in the family and school systems. This paper encourages educators to transform, by engineering and fostering school systems, and to provide opportunities for self-determination, influence, self-efficacy, competence and participation within the school community. For the most part these attributes are seen only in terms of the individual. Our challenge is to foster these at the collective level. For children, the school community is the ideal place for this to transpire.

Note 1.

This paper was produced as part of a collaborative writing project and all authors share equally in the credit for the work. There is no first author. We wish to acknowledge the following for their work during the data-collection phase of the research: Kay Abel, Joanne Collyer, Margaret Maassen, LeeAnne Ryall, Mary Scully, Teresa Yertzman, Michelle Zemanek.

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Julie Ann Pooley has been a Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University since 1991. She is involved in teaching in both the undergraduate and postgraduate psychology programs and has recently been awarded a National Teaching Award by the Australian University Teaching Committee. Her current research is focusing on communities facing natural disasters, through which she is trying to determine what enables communities to become resilient to impending threats. She is also interested in the area of environmental education and attitudes towards the environment. Julie Ann has been involved with many projects within the Perth community to determine the different needs of diverse groups.

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Neil Drew is an Associate Professor and the Associate Dean of the College of Arts at Notre Dame University, Australia. His research interests include social impact assessment, the decline of deference, social justice and procedural fairness. He recently co-authored two chapters of a statistics manual. In his spare time Neil tries to revive his career as a rock musician.

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- Appendix A: Sense of School Community Interview
1. Tell me about your School community.
 2. What does your School community mean to you?
 3. Tell me about the people in your School community.
 4. How do you interact with the people in your school community? (That is, what do you do with these people?).
 5. What are the good things about your school community?

6. What are the bad things about your school community?
7. What activities do you know about in your school community?
8. What activities do you participate in?
9. What happens when you want something done in your school community?