Radical student participation: lessons from an urban government primary school in Tigray, Ethiopia

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Recent policies in Ethiopia put students at the heart of school improvement through structures for peer leadership and school-level consultation, evaluation, and decision-making. This article draws on an ethnographic study of a government school in Tigray, Ethiopia to explore how the participation and influence of students is achieved and mediated by structures and processes in school. Three key contexts of student participation are explored: positions of peer leadership (monitor, 'one-to-five' network leader), public evaluation sessions (*gim gima*), and the Parent Student Teacher Association (PSTA). Recommendations are made for sharing and strengthening democratic practices and for future research.

1. Student participation: principles and practice

Research around the world confirms the value of students' participation in efforts to improve teaching, learning, and conditions in school. There are strong educational, ethical, legal, and pragmatic grounds for involving students in processes of teaching and learning, consultation, evaluation, and other aspects of leadership in school.

There are numerous historical examples of education systems incorporating formal structures for peer learning and leadership. In the Monitorial schools for the poor which flourished in 19th century Britain, India, and elsewhere, students served as tutors (Bell 1808; Reigart 1916). Similar practices are a long-standing feature of education within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Girma 1967). In other contexts, students have accepted noninstructional roles, for example, maintaining discipline (Gerber and Kauffman 1981; Adzahlie-Mensah 2014), or providing targeted pastoral support for disadvantaged peers (Mitra 2004; Young 2016).

Research confirms the important role students can play in improving the quality of provision. Consulting students about teaching and learning is fertile ground for teachers' professional learning, and can support efforts to improve classroom practice (McIntyre, Pedder, and Rudduck 2005; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Flutter 2007). Students can provide valuable insights on conditions in school, identifying aspects of the school environment and relationships which are unconducive to their learning or wellbeing (Kaplan et al. 2007). Such meaningful engagement is intrinsically valuable: students' agency, self-efficacy, and social competence is fostered by forms of participation which involve them accepting responsibilities, listening and being listened to, making decisions, and exercising leadership (Mitra 2004; MacBeath, Frost, and Pedder 2008). Furthermore, in contexts where the

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[1] This research was undertaken while the author was at the University of Leicester.

inculcation of democratic values is an explicit aim of schooling, students' involvement in democratic processes is a means of socialising them into politically desirable values and behaviours (Harber and Mncube 2012, 59-64).

Beyond the instrumental arguments listed above, there are ethical grounds for permitting students to have a say in their places of work (Busher 2016). Most countries are committed to this in principle. For example, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child states:

> Every child who is capable of communicating his or her own views shall be assured the rights to express his opinions freely in all matters and to disseminate his opinions subject to such restrictions as are prescribed by laws. (Article 7)

Nevertheless, the dominant model of schooling internationally is more authoritarian than democratic (Harber and Mncube 2012), with limited scope for students to participate in decisions affecting conditions in school (Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Harber 2010). Students typically experience considerably less agency in school than in their lives outside (Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace 1996). This general pattern is not universally the case: more meaningful student involvement occurs in the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Brazil, and elsewhere (Davies 2002; Bae 2009; McCowan 2010). Unusually in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Ethiopia has also introduced some fairly 'radical' policies for student participation, as outlined below.

The Ethiopian policy context

Like many of its neighbours in SSA, Ethiopia has greatly expanded access to primary schooling in recent years, with enrolment rising from 3 to 18 million students since the early 1990s (MOE 2015). As elsewhere, rapid expansion has placed a strain on national resources (Lewin 2009), with some suggesting a 'quality-quantity trade-off' (Tekeste 2006; Rolleston 2016). Concerns have been raised about falling learning outcomes, as measured in researcher-administered tests of literacy and numeracy and the Government's own National Learning Assessments in key curriculum areas (MOE 2008, 2015; Piper 2010; Tassew and Aregawi 2016). This evidence indicates inequitable learning outcomes for students by gender and location, and a widespread failure of children from the poorest households to achieve basic skills (Rose and Alcott 2015). In response, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has introduced policies aimed at quality improvements, including cost-sharing (MOE 2005), community participation in school-based management (MOE 2015), and school self-evaluation and improvement planning (MOE 2007, 2010; for an overview, see Mitchell 2015a).[2]

Such policies are familiar in SSA and other contexts which are marked by inadequate material and financial resources, low salaries, and challenges surrounding staff and student attendance. For example, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE 2010) stipulates the participation of community members in processes of management and evaluation as a minimum standard of educational provision. This is advanced as a means of

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[2] These reforms, introduced over the past decade as part of the Government of Ethiopia's General Education Quality Improvement Package (GEQIP), are currently being evaluated through a major seven-year study as part of the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) project (see Rose and Tassew 2017).

ensuring local ownership and downward accountability of the school to its community (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009; but see Rose 2003; Mitchell 2017b).

Nevertheless, the participation of *students* in processes of consultation, evaluation and accountability is unusual. This aspect of the education system in Ethiopia is 'radical', in the sense of: '[a] departure from what is usual or traditional; progressive, unorthodox, or innovative in outlook, conception, design' (OED 2016). Three examples of this are as follows. Firstly, students are appointed to the school's governing body, the PSTA (parent, student and teacher association), which is responsible for overseeing management processes and identifying development priorities (MOE 2015). Student involvement in such bodies is uncommon in SSA and elsewhere (Khan 2006; Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009, 5). Secondly, students participate in school self-evaluation (MOE 2010, 60-62) and teacher performance appraisal (Abebayehu 2005, 621). Although this practice is increasingly common in higher education institutions around the world (MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt 2015), it is unusual in government-run primary schools.[3] Thirdly, at the classroom level, students support the learning of their peers through the 'one-to-five' network system (Weldemariam and Girmay 2015). This is a collectivist system of student organisation whereby a class is divided into 'networks' (groups, cells) of 5 or 6 students, each of which has a teacher-appointed 'network leader'. The one-to-five system is used widely in Ethiopia for the purpose of knowledge-sharing and social control in the areas of agriculture, health, and security (Maes et al. 2015; Haftu 2016) but was only recently introduced to schools.

The nature and implementation of the policies outlined above are likely to vary across the country. Not only are there wide disparities in material conditions within and between the country's nine ethnic regions and two chartered cities (Tekeste 2006; Mitchell 2017a, 19-20), but the Regional Education Bureaus (REBs) exercise authority over many aspects of schooling. At the local level, REB directives are overseen by the *Woreda* Education Office (WEO). If the 'participative' policies described above foster downward accountability (of schools to their communities) then within the civil service bureaucracy, accountability runs in the opposite direction: teachers report to management, which reports to the WEO, etc.

Given the lack of previous research into student participation in Ethiopia, the focus and contribution of this article is to outline the principal modalities of student participation in relation to maintaining and improving conditions in school.

2. Study design

This article draws from a broader ethnographic case study of the agendas, participation and influence of management, teachers, students, and parents at 'Ketema'[4], an urban government primary school in Tigray, Ethiopia (Mitchell 2017a). The present article addresses the question:

> *How is the participation and influence of students achieved and mediated by structures and processes in school?*

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[3] Unusual, but not unknown. For example, Crossley et al. (2016) report that primary student involvement in teacher performance appraisal was recently introduced in Fiji.

[4] Ketema (a pseudonym, meaning 'town' in a Tigrigna) is pronounced with the stress on the first syllable.

The absence of previous research in this area suggested the value of exploratory, inductive, qualitative research. The study used an ethnographic approach, informed by previous case studies of government schools (Hargreaves 1967; Wolcott 1967; Ball 1981; Burgess 1983). Another influence was Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1997) portraiture: 'an approach to inquiry which resists the more typical social science preoccupation with documenting pathology and suggesting remedies' (141). There has been a tendency for education research in Ethiopia to take a 'deficit' view of local practices, based on foreign notions of quality (Mitchell 2015a, 337-9). The Ketema study was motivated by a 'search for goodness' rather than pathology (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1997, 141).

I gained permission to undertake a study in the region through contacts I had made working at a teacher training college in Tigray with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) from 2007-2009. Ketema was one of 18 schools in an urban *woreda* (local authority). It was a large primary school with 1300 students and 45 members of staff, including three members of management. Academically its performance was average, neither at the top nor the bottom of the *woreda* rankings.

Fieldwork was conducted in two three-month phases in 2014. Data collection focused on the meetings of various bodies, and the activities of Section B, a class of 45 students aged 11-15, of mixed gender (18 female, 27 male), religion (27 Muslim, 18 Orthodox Christian), attainment, and household wealth.[5] Fieldwork involved studying activities first-hand and recording observations in fieldnotes (FNs) using low inference vocabulary (Carspecken 1995); developing data through open-ended, informant-led interviews (Wolcott 1995, 102); collecting institutional documents; and pursuing the development of the research through progressive focusing (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The cross-cultural nature of this study required negotiating divergent ethical principles in the classroom, the ethics review committee, and professional and legal codes in the UK and Ethiopia. Throughout this process, my planning and action was guided by a framework for ethical analysis (Stutchbury and Fox 2009), accounts of which appear elsewhere (Mitchell 2015b, Mitchell 2015c, Mitchell 2015d, Mitchell 2017a, 63; Fox and Mitchell 2017).

As a European foreigner I was an object of considerable interest for students, especially on first visiting a class. However, after spending many months with Section B, observing their activities inside and outside of lessons, I became a familiar part of school life ('the 46th student', as one teacher put it) and my reactive effect diminished.[6] My capacity in Tigrigna (the working language of the school) never advanced beyond beginner's level. This required me to work closely with assistants who translated institutional documents and audio recordings from lessons and meetings (see Mitchell 2017a, 86-87).

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[5] According to national census data, Tigray is 96% Ethiopian Orthodox Christian and 4% Muslim (CSA 2007). Ketema School is located halfway between a mosque and a church, and there are roughly equal numbers of Muslims and Christians in school.

[6] Duneier (1999, 338) describes this as the 'Becker principle': 'most social processes have a structure that comes close to insuring that a certain set of situations will arise over time. These situations practically require people to do or say certain things because there are other things going on that…are more influential than the social condition of a fieldworker being present.'

Upon completion of the fieldwork, the case data ('the materials assembled by the fieldworker studying the case' [Stenhouse 1978, 37]) included 500,000 words of typed FNs, 2000 photographs, and data from over 100 lesson observations and 38 meetings. This was analysed inductively using Atlas.ti, and constructs developed through my analysis were linked to concepts found in the literature. The present paper draws on data from 14 meetings in which students participated, and from 76 observations of Section B students during lessons, exams and other timetabled activities.

The theoretical framework used in this paper relates structures in school to the agency, participation and influence of students in different social contexts. In his analysis of schools as bureaucracies, Hoy (2003) introduced the notion of 'hindering' and 'enabling structures'. The former are 'rigid rules and regulations aimed at securing compliance' (91); the latter permit experimentation and cooperative problem-solving across the organisational hierarchy to achieve shared goals (92). To the extent that structures circumscribe the autonomy of individuals according to frameworks imposed from above, they are 'hindering'; insofar as they allow flexibility and responsiveness to the preferences and initiative of individuals, they are 'enabling'. In the context of community participation in school management in Malawi, Rose (2003) suggested a continuum ranging from 'genuine' to 'pseudo-participation'. The former is 'voluntary and spontaneous', reflecting individuals' capacity to engage in 'real decision-making and governance, where all members have equal power to determine the outcome of decisions' (47). Conversely, pseudo-participation is a process whereby:

> citizens are merely kept informed of developments at the school level, and are expected to accept decisions that have already been made. This form of participation is extractive, often limited to contributing resources for school construction and maintenance. (ibid.)

The potential for students to influence conditions in school reflects their power. Lukes (2005) distinguishes between three dimensions of power. *One-dimensional power* is exercised in asserting one's preferences within a framework established from above, such as voting in a referendum, where the voter decides which way to vote, but not the subject of the referendum or the terms of the motion. In electing a monitor as class representative, students exercise one-dimensional power. *Two-dimensional power* involves shaping the decision-making arena itself – setting the agenda, deciding who will participate, and which issues will be put to a vote. The notion of genuine participation as 'voluntary and spontaneous' entails two-dimensional power. *Three-dimensional power* is a mode of domination which operates at the level of individuals' notions of what is normal and acceptable. This is exercised in securing individuals' consent to dominant power relations by affecting their values, motivations and sense of place in the world. Three-dimensional power is beyond the scope of the present article; for a discussion of this, see Mitchell (2017b).

3. Findings

Contexts of student participation

Fieldwork at Ketema revealed three important contexts of student participation:

i) *Positions of peer leadership*, including monitor and network leader.
ii) *'Gim gima'*, evaluation sessions, where the conduct of students and teachers is publicly critiqued for the purposes of accountability and improvement.
iii) *The PSTA*, the school's governing body, which oversees management processes and makes budgetary decisions.

These are considered below.

i) Positions of peer leadership: monitor, network leader

The expectation of shared responsibility amongst students is best illustrated through the positions of monitor and network leader (see Table 1).

Table 1 Student leadership positions in 7B

	Monitor	Network leader
Number	2 (1 male, 1 female)	7 (2 male, 5 female)
Level of responsibility	Class	Network (group of 5 or 6 peers)
Means of appointment	Annual election (voted by peers)	Academically top-ranking students appointed by tutor (each semester)
Main responsibilities	- Administrative duties (e.g. take attendance, log misdemeanours) - Ensure quiet working conditions in the classroom (in teacher's absence)	- Support the academic learning of peers (share work, explain concepts, answer questions) - Facilitate group work in lessons (e.g. as scribe, chairperson)

Monitors

Monitors principally serve a social control function. At the start of the 2014/5 school year, 7B elected Mariam and Yonas to be their monitors. Shortly after her appointment Mariam told me:

> the major problem in this school and in the class is disturbance: [students] being noisy, standing on the desk, and – like you have noticed – missing classes and being disrespectful. (FN719)

In her ethnographic study of a low-fee private school in Addis Ababa, Poluha (2004) identified monitoring as a violent, gendered role:

> Male monitors…often beat [students] with their hands or with sticks; they sometimes made them kneel in front with their hands in the air…Although girls were elected as monitors, they took no part in keeping order in the classroom…From my observations the female monitors did not seem to have any particular duties, but were elected or appointed more as a token of equality. (90)

I did not find gendered differences in the way Yonas and Mariam enacted the monitor role; in no sense was the latter a 'token of equality'.[7] The pair worked cooperatively – taking attendance, logging misdemeanours, arranging lists for clubs and sports tournaments. They were most active when no teacher was present, which was a regular occurrence at the start of the year due to teacher transfers within the *woreda* and timetable clashes. In the absence of a teacher, the pair established a conducive working environment, ensuring their classmates remained seated and continued with their work. Mariam stood at the teacher's desk, Yonas at the back, or vice versa. Each carried a slip of paper on which they wrote the names of students who were being noisy, fighting, or moving between desks. Neither used a stick, but both occasionally used light force, pushing *ribushti* (disturbing) students back to their seats; classmates assisted in these efforts to impose order. Requests for permission to visit the toilet or use the board were directed to the monitors, who sometimes permitted two or three classmates to teach a 'mini lesson' to the class.

The monitors did not personally benefit from the working time made available to their peers, and were sometimes visibly caught between responsibilities to themselves and the class, for example, continuing with their own work until rising noise levels obliged them to put down their pens and intervene.
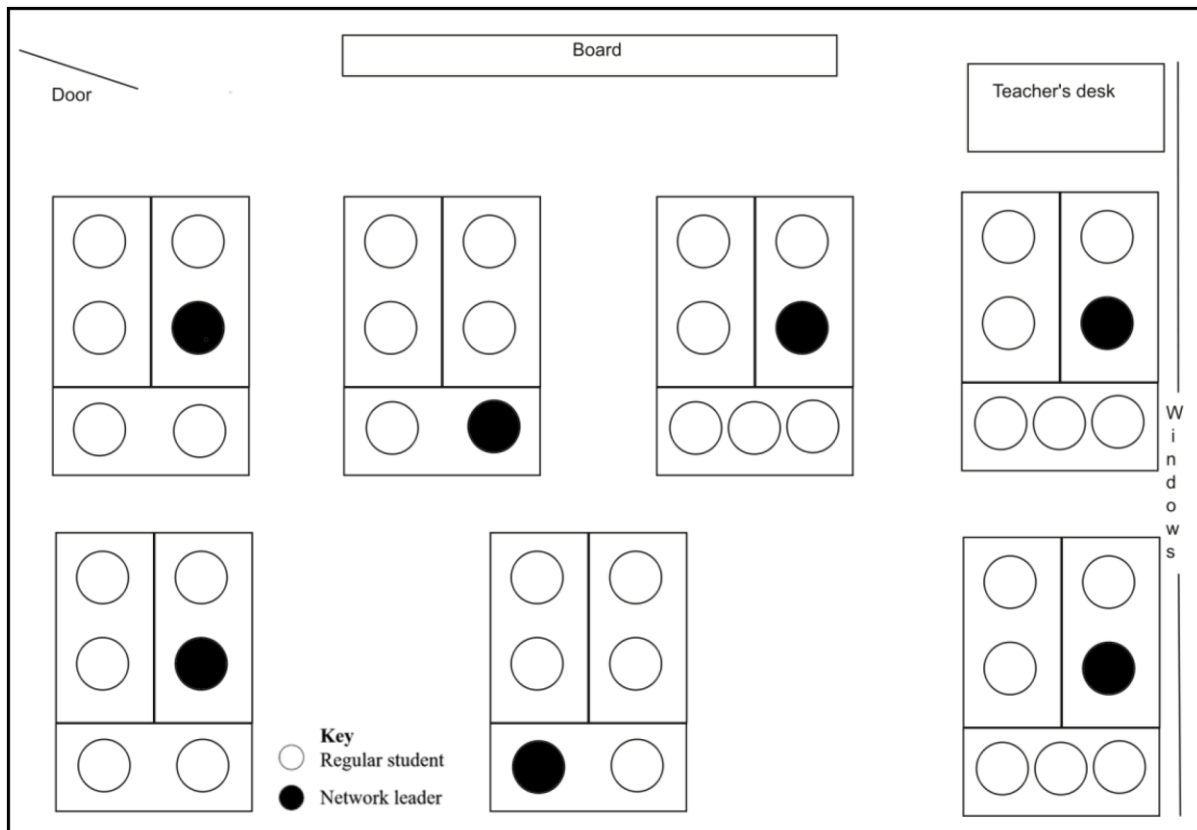
Network leaders

The one-to-five network system draws on the long-standing practice of 'ranking' students based on their academic grades at the end of each semester (e.g. #1 to #45). The top-ranking students are appointed 'network leaders' (*gujiley halafi*) and charged with supporting the five or six students with whom they share a desk. Their main responsibilities are:

- *Academic authorities*, explaining tasks and content, sharing work.
- *Group work facilitators*, managing group discussions, encouraging participation.
- *Behavioural models*, modelling appropriate behaviour, regulating peers' conduct in line with teacher expectations.

The organisation of seating around the network system (see Figure 1) ensures that every student has a positive model at his or her desk. Even before the teacher enters the class, network leaders take out their textbooks and turn to the correct page: they stand to greet the teacher; copy the date and title from the board; reinforce calls for silence, and act quickly upon instructions.

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[7] Many factors may contribute to the differences between Poluha's (2004) findings at Birabiro School and those reported here. The Grade 4 class in Poluha's (2004) study comprised 105 students aged 9-15 from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Conversely, 7B was an upper primary class, ethnically homogenous (Tigrayan), with a narrower age range (11-15), and occupying less cramped conditions. Furthermore, the fieldwork for the Ketema study took place 15 years later, and thus further into the current reform period.

Figure 1 The organisation of classroom seating around the one-to-five student network system

While teachers explained the network system to me in terms of learning support, students additionally stressed the social control function. For example, Mariam (a network leader as well as a monitor), explained:

> The members of my group are not active and not poor: they sometimes ask questions, and sometimes keep silent. As a network leader I support students to… understand what is not clear from the lesson…[I] support the poor students, and make the noisy and disturbing students be disciplined, and advise them to be…good. (FN719)

Students responded differently to the demands of network leadership. This is illustrated with reference to three examples: Jerusalem, Mariam and Zeki. Although physically small, Jerusalem dominated her network through her constant activity and competitive spirit. The highest-ranking student in class, students consulted Jerusalem inside and outside lessons as a subject expert and source for copying. During group work she was facilitator, eliciting inputs from others – sometimes forcibly so, tapping companions on the head to get their attention. She always wanted to be scribe, and resisted others' attempts to assume this role.

Conversely, Mariam was less physically domineering. Like Jerusalem, she was the focal person in her group, but she was a facilitator more than an authority. She was respectful of her companions and did not prod or tap them like the former. The students in her network were comfortable sharing their ideas. One female member of this group ranked #45 in the

class; she never spoke voluntarily in whole class contexts, but was confident speaking within the network.

The third example, Zeki, presents a negative case. Like other top-ranking students, he regularly volunteered to answer in class, but lacked the will or capacity to lead his network. When he thought the teacher wouldn't notice he sometimes abandoned his group. Since he failed to control behaviour, students in Zeki's network were regularly in trouble – for being late, not doing homework, and not paying attention. In an attempt to improve the situation, the tutor moved Zeki's network to the front of the class, and sent an older student to join them; but Zeki's network still trailed behind others', until it was eventually disbanded.

Clearly, these positions carry significant responsibilities. In rare cases, students are appointed to positions of leadership against their wishes or capacity; generally they are happy to assist their peers, regarding this as a reasonable and unremarkable social obligation. They are not lone, pro-school agents, dragging and pushing their classmates through lessons; monitors and network leaders are supported by the majority of their classmates, who also intervene when students step out of line (talking out of turn, making noises, damaging school property). There are strong expectations of collective responsibility for maintaining and improving conditions in school.

ii) *Gim gima*: a surveillance and accountability mechanism

The discussion so far has focused on selected students in positions of leadership. Beyond this, all students participate in processes of mutual surveillance and internal accountability through a practice known as '*gim gima*' (public evaluation). *Gim gima* was developed in the 1980s by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) – then a Marxist rebel group, and now the dominant partner in the ruling 'revolutionary democratic' Government of Ethiopia (Bach 2011; Vaughan 2011). *Gim gim* originated as 'a mechanism for promoting accountability and democratic decision-making within the TPLF army, before being adopted by civilian organisations' (Young 1997, 203). It combines traditional Tigrayan arbitration practices (Hendrie 1999), with Leninist and TPLF innovations (Young 1997).

All sections of the Ketema School community engage in *gim gima*, including staff and parents. Students engage in two types of *gim gima*:

- *Grade gim gima*, a teacher-facilitated consultative forum in which students evaluate their peers and teachers according to management-provided criteria for the purpose of teacher performance appraisal and internal supervision.
- *Class gim gima*, a less formal session which generally take place at lunchtime in the presence of the tutor. Discussion focuses on raising and solving problems within the tutor group.

At one Grade 6 *gim gima* I attended, around 150 students crowded into a single classroom. Two senior teachers facilitated the session, one of whom took minutes. The students were asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their peers and teachers. Most of the 90-minute session was occupied with discussion of classmates, who were criticised for lateness, truancy, and cheating in tests. Monitors were criticised for failing to adequately control

behaviour in class, and network leaders for failing to support their peers. The following comments are typical of those recorded in the minutes:

'Student A reacted to our Teacher B** and has no respect for teachers.'

'When [other] students are disturbing, the monitors jot down their names, but when the monitors disturb they don't write them down.'

'C and D are always late, but these students equally sit the exams with the rest of us and pass…Therefore, strict and stringent follow-up and control should be made for these students in the future.' (FN420)

Beyond the explicit criticism of individual students, comments such as the latter indicate students' dissatisfaction with particular policies in school. They often complained about the unfairness of truants and latecomers sitting exams alongside their peers, but there was no hope of their changing this practice. Management wished to maximise promotion in order to raise the school's profile within the *woreda* (see Mitchell 2017a, 121-126). *Gim gima* is not a forum for making policy decisions, but for evaluating individuals' compliance with institutional rules and collective expectations.

Management's main concern in *gim gima* is internal supervision. Students are asked to evaluate their teachers according to the following criteria:

- Punctuality
- Monitoring students, regularly taking attendance
- Setting homework, class and group work, giving feedback
- Using gown, textbook, notebook and duster
- Recording corrective measures in the register
- Providing tutorials and special support for students
- Resolving ethical issues as a parent (FN420)

These derive from WEO evaluation criteria rather than students' particular concerns (cf. Ehren et al. 2016). However, since they were asked, students duly reported teachers who failed to wear their gown or take morning attendance. Students criticisms extended beyond the formal consultation agenda, based on their own sense of appropriate conduct. For example at the Grade 6 *gim gima* mentioned earlier, two students complained about their Music teacher:

'Teacher E has a big problem, he didn't teach us Music at all. He didn't give us [continuous assessment], but only the mid-semester and final exams, so we were not able to know our results. It should be thought over for the future.' (FN420)

During the fieldwork period students used *gim gima* to report one teacher who came to school drunk, another who used bad language, a third who failed to control the class, and a fourth who beat them unfairly. A senior teacher who handled such complaints told me that he always sought to establish the veracity of students' claims, since these could sometimes (rarely) be motivated by revenge (e.g. for bad marks).

> 'If you want to know the truth, you check by a vote. If all students agree – or if fifty-plus-one [percent] agree: it's true. If there is one student only: reject it.' (interview in English, FN737)

If upheld, student complaints are taken seriously: teachers are criticised by management in front of their colleagues and receive a negative performance appraisal, which can affect their prospects for promotion or transfer. In extreme cases, a teacher may face disciplinary proceedings, a financial penalty or worse. For example, a male teacher who was accused of unfairly beating students received a formal warning in a staff meeting. When he continued to use corporal punishment, his salary was suspended and he was reported to the police. This illustrates the genuine consequences which can result from *gim gima*.

This politically-inspired practice is at odds with traditional elder-youth relations in Ethiopia (Poluha 2004; Mjaaland 2016) and elsewhere in SSA, where obedience and deference to elders is expected (Omolewa 2007; Adzahlie-Mensah 2014; Tabulawa 2013). It also diverges from everyday teacher-student relations. This is illustrated with reference to a 'class *gim gima*' I attended with Section B, which was facilitated by Yerga, their tutor and English teacher. I had observed Yerga teach on many occasions, and students were always appropriately respectful. However, in the class *gim gima*, they openly criticised various aspects of his conduct. A female student complained that he had not yet contacted the parents of students who were failing in English, as he had promised two weeks ago. 'You are too lenient with us,' she said, 'You've got to take tough measures.' Yerga explained that he had not forgotten to call these parents, but was reluctant to do so in case the students faced negative repercussions at home. Furthermore, he said, if he *appeared* to be overly easy-going in class, this was due to his subject: 'If I become aggressive you will not only hate the teacher, but the subject matter as well.' These arguments were rejected.

> Female student: In [our previous English teacher's] class no-one disturbed and shouted; everyone was attentive and kept silent. But in your class students started to disturb.
>
> Male student: The reason we come to school is to learn: our goal is education, not for joking. And so you have to be strict and tough in dealing with us.
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> Male student: You said: "If I make you bring your parents, then the parents will get the students in trouble." But it is the parents who will be in trouble if their children's results are not being communicated. (6B *gim gima*, FN191)

Yerga accepted these criticism, and subsequently arranged to meet the parents of students who were failing in English (see Mitchell 2016, 5-6). As illustrated here, *gim gim* is a radical practice, in marked contrast to the daily round of life in school. In providing a space where students can raise concerns with their teachers, *gim gima* is an 'enabling structure' (Hoy 2003) which serves a downward accountability function (Abelmann and Elmore 1999).

iii) The PSTA: 'decorative' participation

The PSTA is the highest decision-making authority in school: it oversees management processes (e.g. disciplinary and performance appraisal systems), establishes development

priorities, and controls the budget.[8] At Ketema this body comprised the Director, 2-3 teachers, 3-4 parents, and 2 students. The latter, representatives of the student parliament, were both female students in Grades 7 and 8. In comparison to the contexts of student participation discussed above, PSTA meetings provide fairly limited scope for meaningful student involvement. Students' participation in these forums is largely 'decorative' (Hart 1992), providing an air of democratic legitimacy while bolstering the authority of the Director.

The minutes from ten PSTA meetings which occurred during the fieldwork revealed students to be minor partners in the governing body. Although the PSTA did not convene without its full complement of parent members, it met when only one student was present, which illustrates the comparatively low value attached to their presence. Students spoke rarely compared to the other participants, and comments were attributed to named students in only one of the ten meetings. Unlike staff and parents, students did not table items for the agenda, nor did they ever oppose the preferences of the Director. Student comments were always preceded by a 'cue' from the Director in which he stated his own preferred position, which the students proceeded to endorse. For example:

> Director: The library has been closed for about six months…This made it difficult for students to get support from reading reference books…So let's discuss this matter. Secondly, there is a problem with the microphone…Because of this we are unable to pass on necessary information to students.

> Student F: Speaking as a student, since we have a good library, its closure makes me sad. So, discussing with parents we have to hire someone from the community to resolve the problem. Regarding the [PA system], the information released at [morning assembly] is not audible to all students, so if there is money, it is good to buy us one. (PSTA meeting, FN813)

As illustrated here, student participation in PSTA meetings amounts to an opportunity to assent to the Director's preferred position. This is unsurprising as their inclusion on the governing body started not long before I arrived at the school, and evidence from elsewhere suggests that meaningful student participation in management structures is a developmental process which takes time and staff commitment, in addition to a conducive external policy context (MacBeath, Frost, and Pedder 2008). Nevertheless, the inclusion of students on the PSTA would appear to be a necessary precondition for more meaningful involvement.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This paper has explored how the participation and influence of students is achieved and mediated by structures and processes in school. Four modalities of participation were identified: students as *academic leaders* and *behavioural regulators* in relation to their peers; as *evaluators* within the school's internal supervision system; and as *decision-makers* in the PSTA. These forms of participation are best understood within a social control frame. Student participation in the PSTA is primarily 'decorative', serving to legitimise management

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[8] Further analysis of the PSTA's remit is reported elsewhere (***** 2017a, 2017b).

authority. Similarly, the evaluation of teachers according to externally-defined standards of conduct, and the ubiquitous practices of mutual surveillance, ranking and public critique in school are 'disciplinary technologies' (Foucault ([1977] 1995) aimed at securing compliance with management agendas (see Mitchell 2017b). Alongside its knowledge-sharing function, the one-to-five network system also facilitates social control. While group work and peer learning are often reflexively associated with democratisation and progressivism, they are also consistent with long-standing practices in the Orthodox church, Monitorial schools, and indigenous pedagogies, as discussed in the introduction. The delegation of teaching responsibilities to students does not alter the fundamental relationship between students and the curriculum: schooling is still understood as the transmission of knowledge embodied in the state-authorised textbook. The one-to-five network system is perhaps best conceived as a refinement of existing formalistic pedagogy rather than a progressive reform (Guthrie 2017, 63). In bolstering rather than challenging existing power relations, the dominant modalities of student participation at Ketema may be located at the extractive, 'pseudo-participation' end of Rose's (2003) continuum.

From the perspective of Lukes' (2005) power framework, the consultative and evaluative forums at Ketema offer students one-dimensional power, permitting them to vote for monitors and express their views within the management-specified consultation agenda. The outcomes of consultation crucially depend on how students' concerns are mediated by management; only where these stakeholders' interests coincide (e.g. on the issues of teacher attendance and corporal punishment) are students' grievances addressed; otherwise, their views are not acted upon. This is not to deny the important downward accountability function served by *gim gima*, which is an enabling structure (Hoy 2003), supporting cross-hierarchical cooperation between management and students to address issues of teacher conduct and accountability. As such, this practice may be of wider relevance in contexts marked by limited resources, violence, and teacher absenteeism (Harber and Mncube 2012). The practice may be strengthened by extending the range of consultation to known issues of student concern such as the use of corporal punishment. In common with findings elsewhere (Fielding and Rudduck 2002), *gim gima* does not routinely involve students sharing their ideas on the core business of teaching and learning. Bringing the issues of *what* and *how* students learn into the remit of discussion would be a more genuinely radical basis for student participation.

Anecdotally, outside the research context of Ketema School, individuals working in universities and high schools raised with me the potential downside of *gim gima* as an accountability mechanism. Some expressed concerns that the practice eroded trust in teachers and management, while others expressed fears over false claims. The latter may be of greater concern in higher tiers of the education system, as Ketema staff expressed confidence in their ability to identify false accusations through appeals to the wider student body (such as the senior teacher quoted above). However, the perceived threat to the professional status of teachers should be taken seriously in light of the deterioration in teachers' working conditions in recent years resulting from the rapid expansion of the sector (Tekeste 2006; Sarton et al. 2009). *Gim gima* potentially 'sandwiches' teachers between bottom-up pressure from students and top-down professional and political pressure from the state (Abebayehu 2005;

Workneh 2012; Berihu and Mewcha 2015; Fekede and Tynjälä 2015; Mitchell 2017b). As such, it may demotivate teachers and foster a climate of distrust around their work.

I must re-emphasise that these reflections are not based on evidence from Ketema, where student involvement in *gim gima* was a routine and uncontentious aspect of school life. (Indeed, the only Ketema teacher I heard object to the practice was the one reported for beating his Grade 5 students). Nevertheless, Ketema's unproblematic adoption of *gim gima*, the one-to-five system, and other TPLF-inspired practices may not be representative of schools elsewhere. Ketema was located in the heartland of the TPLF and half of the staff were party members (Mitchell 2017a, 110-111) which may have encouraged the acceptance of these and other policies. This single school ethnographic case study provides no basis for statistical generalisations to other schools (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), and further research is needed to establish the prevalence and effects of the practices identified at Ketema.

A final point I wish to highlight relates to the exciting potential of the one-to-five network system in Ethiopia and perhaps other low income contexts with collectivist values. In charging students with responsibility for their peers' learning, the one-to-five network system is an example of resource optimisation, drawing on previously untapped human resources in school. This indigenous innovation may constitute an inclusive, socially meaningful, and cost-effective means of boosting the learning outcomes of low-performing students who are not currently achieving curriculum objectives (Piper 2010; Rose and Alcott 2015; Tassew and Aregawi 2016). Mixed-methods research is needed to explore the effects of networks on student attendance, attainment and completion. Further work is also needed to identify appropriate means of selecting, inducting and supporting the work of network leaders (see Mitchell 2017a, 251).

This discussion does not exhaust the lessons from the case. I hope that future studies in Ethiopia will amplify successes and achievements, which is necessary to know what is desirable and achievable within existing policy, material and socio-cultural realities.

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