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Student Voice in Curriculum Reform: Whose Voices, Who's Listening?

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Introduction

At the time of writing, there is a paucity of international research indicating any routine collaborative engagement with students in second-level education on curricular development. Almost two decades ago, Rudduck and Flutter concluded that young people have important insights on the teaching and learning environment which may serve as a 'commentary on the curriculum' but asserted that there are difficulties in eliciting their views on the curriculum beyond 'bits and pieces' such as, what does or does not engage them (Rudduck and Flutter 2004, p. 75). Consequently,

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they argued the necessity to support students in developing a language for 'talking about learning and about themselves as learners, so that they feel it is legitimate for them actively to contribute to discussions about schoolwork with teachers' (Rudduck and Flutter 2004, p. 76).

A significant motivation to support students to confidently engage in opportunities to change curriculum and instruction is the contention that this experience can foster in students a greater understanding of *how* they learn and lead to a stronger sense of their own abilities (Mitra, 2003). Furthermore, there is a body of literature which argues that student voice work should go far beyond ascertaining perspectives from young people on their experience of education and move towards a democratic process of shared curricular development and co-construction, as well as a collective responsibility for developing solutions in education environments (Bovill et al. 2011; Fielding 2015; Shirley 2015). Findings from an Irish study conducted with the National Council for Curriculum Council (NCCA) focusing on a consultative process with post-primary level students on junior cycle reform, argues for encouragement and inclusion of student perspectives in education discourse at the national policy level within a framework that provides equally for input on decision-making amongst all education stakeholders (Flynn 2017). Crucial to that inclusive decision-making space, both at system and school levels, is the necessity for steps to be taken to 'co-construct' language, ensuring a common understanding of communication and vocabulary dependent on the ages of young participants. It is also essential to mitigate adult interpretations of students' perspectives within this discourse (Flynn 2017, p. 30).

This chapter begins by positioning student voice with respect to 'children's rights'. International policy driving the consultation of children in matters that affect them (UNCRC 1989, Article 12) contextualises that discussion and leads on to an examination of the relationship between 'Voice and Power'. The next section of the chapter focuses on 'Student Participation in Curricular Development' and draws evidence from the NCCA consultative project as part of junior cycle reform, in which more than 350 students in second-level education participated. This evidence prioritises the insights of students consulted on the development of junior cycle specifications. Findings from that study will inform the argument to foster a more democratic engagement in school activity for all

stakeholders. This includes the interrogation of an inclusive framework for moving towards a sustainable process of authentic engagement with students on meaningful issues such as curriculum reforms.

Student Voice and Children's Rights

There has been a growing recognition both nationally and internationally of the importance of children's rights especially influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). The UNCRC challenged societal behaviour and attitudes towards children as a group and sought to improve this by affirming their right to 'special consideration' enshrined in the articles of the Convention.

The Irish socio-political landscape responded to Ireland's ratification of the UN convention in 1992 with the publication of a ten-year National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland 2000). In accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989), the first goal stated that 'Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity' (Government of Ireland [GoI] 2000, p. 11). This commitment generated a number of important developments for children including an amendment to the Irish Constitution in 2015, which led to the insertion of a new section relating to children's rights. Such developments represent extensive policy commitments providing a variety of contexts and opportunities in accordance with Article 12 to hear the voices of children and young people 'in decisions that affect their lives' (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA] 2015, p. 2).

Lundy (2007) highlights a common and cogent criticism levelled at Article 12 of the UNCRC, namely how easy it is for adults to comply with outward signs of consultation and yet ultimately ignore children's views. She explains that tokenistic or decorative participation not only is in breach of Article 12 but can be counter-productive in giving children a false sense of having been consulted or having participated in a meaningful way. An essential element within the student voice engagement must involve a commitment to 'authentic listening' which is realised only through 'acknowledgement and response to the views expressed and

suggestions made by student participants' (Flynn 2014, p. 166). This is integral to Lundy's (2007) children's rights–based framework for participation which emphasises four essential elements: space, voice, audience and influence. Within this framework, Lundy stresses the importance of:

- Space: Rights-holders must be given the opportunity to express views
- Voice: Rights-holders must be supported to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate

Lundy's (2007) framework has been adopted by the Irish DCYA in the recent National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (DCYA 2015). In 2020, the DCYA and Department of Education and Skills are collaborating in their support of student voice initiatives, such as a project initiated by Comhairle na nÓg[1] on improving opportunites for student voice in schools.

Voice and Power

Engaging voices of children in student voice work challenges power relations and the privileging of one voice over another. The authority of the adult role in relation to the child is imbued with social legitimacy (Cruddas 2007). While actively accessing children's and young people's voices is laudable, there are a number of different interpretations of the multi-dimensional concept of 'voice' which can impact the process. One approach is to talk about 'giving voice' or attending to the 'voice of the child'. Here, voice is used as a noun which, paradoxically, locates the speakers as passively enabled to express views, removing agency from the speaker. An alternate conceptual understanding of voice is inherent in its verbal form, 'to voice'. This approach recognises the active agency of the speaker and implies an active reaction—'to listen'. A significant element of this conceptualisation, in the context of student voices and education, is the assumption that having a 'voice' infers having a 'legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/or having an active role in decisions about and implementation of educational policies and

practice' (Holdsworth 2000, p. 355). When accessing student views in education discourse, it is important to acknowledge that students will each interpret the world with respect to their own relative experiences which will not necessarily yield a uniform interpretation despite commonalities within the sample group. Therefore, it is more appropriate to acknowledge the 'voice*s*' of students or indeed students' voices rather than the illusory pursuit of a homogenous voice (Flynn 2017).

Fielding and Bragg (2003) conclude that some of the benefits of consulting students and involving them in organisational and pedagogic decision-making include; improved academic, communication and civic skills amongst students, as well as an increased sense of agency, motivation and engagement with school affairs. Leitch and Mitchell (2007) support that conclusion and point to extensive evidence demonstrating that schools are likely to increase the effectiveness of individual and group learning as well as student motivation by means of active consultation processes with students. However, they caution that although it has been demonstrated that student consultation can help teachers and students achieve more collaborative learning cultures in schools, students are typically seen as the potential beneficiaries of change rather than as genuine participants in the process.

It is important therefore that any attempt to understand or indeed interpret the views of children is conducted with *their* support and approval as otherwise it would be too easy to transpose 'adult' rationality and inference (Flynn 2013). Listening authentically requires subsequent affirmation from the young person to confirm that what has been heard is interpreted as it was intended to be received. This necessitates more than 'listening' but rather, a shared experience of understanding or indeed a co-construction of language. Such a shift requires changes in the power relations of discourse across education stakeholders both at national/policy level and within schools.

The powerful impact evident from opportunities for shared understanding and discourse across education stakeholders is evident from Irish research where students realised potential benefits when their opinions were heard and they encountered an authentic response to their views and research input (Flynn 2014). These benefits include:

- a significant improvement in the quality of their relationships with teachers and their sense of belonging and connectedness to school (Tiburcio and Finch 2005; Flynn 2013);
- an improvement in self-reported levels of confidence and wellbeing (Anderson and Ronson 2005); and
- a heightened sense of being 'cared for' and general experience of comfort in their education environment (Noddings 2005).

The development of caring relations and eliciting dialogue between and with students is important for the engagement of personal intelligences, the development of empathy and awareness of their rights and the rights of others (Smyth et al. 2010). The potential significance of student voice work and its impact on both student-teacher relationships and wellbeing is substantially supported in evidence from international research (ERO 2015; Simmons et al. 2015). In their study which elicited perspectives from students on high stakes testing at second level in Ireland, Smyth and Banks (2012) note that their data concur with international findings in highlighting the importance of students' experience of care, respect, trust and confidence in their relationships with teachers. Smyth (2015) draws on data from the longitudinal *Growing up in Ireland* study which clearly indicates the centrality of student-teacher relationships and classroom climate as crucial influences on children's self-image and wellbeing. This is further corroborated in evidence from international research, which includes the United States, Britain and Australia, indicating a strong association between the quality of student-teacher relationships and 'a number of outcomes, including socio-emotional wellbeing, engagement in schoolwork, feeling a sense of belonging in the school, levels of disciplinary problems and academic achievement' (Smyth 2015, p. 3).

The potential link between student voice and empowerment can only be achieved if the students themselves know that they have been heard and experience an acknowledgement of their views and opinions. Whether the experience has been 'authentic' and how to measure any consequential change may be determined only by the children and young people involved in the process, as it has been demonstrated that there is an inherent danger in this type of engagement research whereby wholly

adult interpretation could lead to an '***adult**eration*' of the findings (Flynn 2013). Ivor Goodson (2002) observed that it was dangerous to believe:

> …that merely by allowing people to "narrate" that we in any serious way give them voice and agency. Transformation requires an interruption to the regularities of school life—a rupturing of the ordinary—that enables teachers and students to "see" alternatives; and requires, ultimately, a coherent institutional commitment. (Goodson, 2002, in Fielding and Rudduck 2002, p. 5)

This partnership of 'interruption' and 'seeing' is about responding to the insights of young people and changing the power relationship between students and all other education stakeholders both at systemic and school levels, so that learning and attitudes to learning become more of a shared responsibility (Rudduck and Demetriou 2003, p. 154). However, facilitating 'a coherent institutional commitment' necessitates an obligation to promote demonstrable and, ultimately, political change (Flynn 2013).

Student Participation in Curricular Reform

O'Brien (2008) acknowledges the correlation between connectedness (sense of belonging), having a voice in school and respectful relationships as shown from research evidence in Canada (Anderson and Ronson 2005) to enhance wellbeing. In one Australian study involving 606 students between the ages of 6 and 17, Simmons et al. (2015) investigated how wellbeing is understood and facilitated in schools. Findings showed that students placed particular emphasis on the importance of opportunities to 'have a say' in relation to these matters.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* establishes 'wellbeing' as one of the eight core principles of junior cycle education, envisaging that the curriculum should contribute 'directly to the physical, mental and social wellbeing of students' (DES 2015, p. 13). Taking 'action to safeguard and promote their wellbeing and that of others' is identified as one of the 24 statements of learning with which junior cycle students are expected to engage as 'essential for students to know, understand and value' (2015,

p. 14). The Learner Voice Research Study (Flynn 2017) conducted on behalf of the NCCA, set out to consult students on the process of curriculum co-construction and development within the context of junior cycle reform. The potential relationship between wellbeing and facilitating student voice was a significant factor in this study which explored the impact on students as a consequence of their involvement and engagement in this curricular consultation.

The NCCA Learner Voice Study set out to facilitate a process of student consultation on the development of new junior cycle curriculum specifications (subject syllabi) and determine a sustainable process for including and listening to student voices in education discourse at systemic (e.g. NCCA) and local (school) levels. Opportunities to involve students in curricular development and co-construction embody democratic, collective responsibility for education reform. The significance of supporting students in building confidence and co-constructing language in order to meaningfully engage in curricular development and co-construction was central to the consultative process pursued within this study. The consultative process prioritised the input of young people in second-level education and consequently, neither parents nor teachers participated in this study. The remit of this study was to consult students on the development of new specifications rather than the broader issue of junior cycle reform. Most particularly, the study provided opportunities at the conclusion of focus group meetings and across wider organised events, for feedback on their experience of being involved in this consultation process and 'having a say' with respect to curricular development.

The Learner Voice Research Study

Initiated in September 2014, the study concluded in May 2017. The methodology was predominantly qualitative within which a mixed methods approach was utilised to both triangulate evidence and generate depth and breadth across that evidence. The tools employed included questionnaires, focus group interviews and individual interviews. Students, teachers and principals from 20 geographically dispersed schools participated in the study at different data gathering stages. The

participating schools represented a geographical span that includes the midlands, the south, the west and the east of the country. The profile of participating schools included 3 Irish medium second-level schools, 6 urban schools designated as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), 2 rural-based DEIS schools, 14 co-educational schools and 6 single-sex schools.

Participants from across those schools took part in group interviews, individual interviews and completion of questionnaires. Group interviews were also conducted with NCCA education officers, a sample of subject specification development groups, and the Board for Junior Cycle (Flynn 2017). In total, more than 350 students participated across the various stages of the consultations. Volunteer groups of students across participating schools were consulted on the development of new subject specifications for junior cycle and their perspectives were shared with subject development groups tasked with compiling input from a broad range of stakeholders towards developing the final specifications for junior cycle curriculum and assessment. An NCCA education officer with expertise in each particular subject area wrote the final specification for that subject following year-long deliberations and consultations. Student input in the final versions of the specifications was reflected differently depending on the format chosen by each education officer. Some NCCA officials chose to include a separate section in specifications which reflected student choices, while others integrated the views of all participants in the consultation process. The specific choices or elements of student voice which impacted on final specifications were not the remit of the Learner Voice Research Study for which the process of consultation and impact on participants was the primary focus.

A number of activities were organised between May 2015 and March 2016 which included seminars, workshops and the meetings of an NCCA initiated student voice forum. The purpose of these activities was to support the research process in providing opportunities for schools to plan and share ideas on embedding a culture of listening and engagement in schools. It also allowed the research team to listen to the perspectives of students on proposed developments in relation to curriculum and assessment, thereby pursuing a methodology for including the perspectives of a sample of student voices in the NCCA junior cycle reform.

It must be emphasised that, in this study, as with much qualitative research, there is no 'representative student voice' (Flynn 2013) and consequently, students' participation in this study was invited in order to elicit a sample of student feedback and perspectives. Consulting students on important issues in education should provide opportunities for young people to offer a range and similar sample of student voices rather than any expectation of a 'homogenous voice'. In the words of one participant, 'it shouldn't matter if there isn't a lot of us involved, it's more important that we **are** involved' (Flynn 2017, p. 6).

Data synthesised from student questionnaires and interview questions indicated that young people were very positive about the experience of participating in the consultation groups and that, during the process, they believed they were heard and that their input had the potential to make a difference. They further insisted that they had important contributions to make in education discourse and, consequently, *should* be heard. In line with findings from Tangen (2009), students acknowledged the positive impact of being heard on their relationships with teachers and their peers as a consequence of the consultative process. This was also evident within the opportunities taken in schools to discuss and prepare for meetings on curricular reform as well as the process of sharing and hearing each other's perspectives. During focus group interviews, a common view that was shared across students from different schools was that they believed there was significant potential for young people to have a greater appreciation of curricular content upon realising that students had participated in the process of reform and development, 'Even if students doing the new junior don't like some bits of the courses, if they know that some students got a chance to make changes I'd say they'll be more interested and even curious' (Flynn 2017, p. 31). One of the most prevalent themes that emerged from the data was the positive link made between students' experience of being heard to their levels of self-confidence and 'sense of value': for example, 'I feel valued'; 'This made me feel important'; and 'My confidence has improved' (Flynn 2017, p. 31). Students also acknowledged their appreciation for some degree of formality within the consultative process as an indication that their input and perspectives were taken seriously. This resonates with the importance for young voices to have an audience and to experience the potential of

their perspectives to influence change (Lundy 2007). Despite the positive experiences of their involvement in these consultations, some students expressed frustration at not having a chance to 'do more' or to pursue the consultative process further. This desire to 'continue the conversation' and realise student impact on curricular change as well as policy development for further planning was also acknowledged across participant education officers and development groups. In focus group feedback on the study, many of these adult participants were keen to explore more opportunities for working closely with students, beyond access to them as 'sources of data' (Fielding 2015) revealing the success of this intervention in progressing attitudes on the importance of deeper engagement with students in curricular co-construction and partnership processes.

Recommendations of this study included the importance of following up with student participants as an opportunity to check summation and interpretation of their input, in addition to clarifying their impact on curricular development. Where opportunities were taken to provide these clarifications or check interpretations, these were greatly appreciated and acknowledged by student participants. Thus, it was recommended that such activity be included always in review processes. This would provide an important opportunity to progress discussions in dialogue rather than through a medium of 'reporting' and would support the cultivation of 'learner partnership' deliberations across stakeholder development groups most particularly at systemic discourse level across different working groups.

The challenge of determining how to embed a culture of listening and a sustainable structure to support and respond to student voices for schools at a national level in curriculum development was an overriding objective of this study. Participants from the 20 schools in this study on occasion compared their progress in this regard as significantly different from one another. The most significant influence on schools, however, was witnessing concrete examples of good practice shared by students and teachers with whom they could relate and the opportunity to question and discuss the development of these structures. It was also acknowledged by participants as a consequence, that this was not something which could be done *for* a school but necessitated a team effort from within.

In order to embed a culture of listening in national policy and education discourse, findings from the NCCA study recommended strongly the necessity to adopt an approach across state agencies, leading by example in such activities to include students as a matter of course and consistency. Adult participants in this research focus and others (Flynn 2014, 2017) acknowledged the expert insights on the part of students when they are given the opportunity to have a say on education matters, however, it is incumbent upon all participants to ensure that this is not an experience which is confined to research and occasional projects. Moreover, embedding a structure both in schools and on a national level to ensure sustainability requires a dialogical process in partnerships with students, where all parties in this dialogue acknowledge that their roles are that of 'learners'.

The Learner Voice Space

Analysis of the consultative process between education stakeholders in the NCCA study, led to the design of a dialogical learning space model with a presumption to influence change and transformative practice, and foster leadership and agency within that experience (Flynn 2017, p. 30). This 'Learner Voice Space' framework (Fig. 3.1) has since been adapted and refined (Flynn 2019) to emphasise the inclusive nature of the model and acknowledge all 'learner roles' in dialogue together, which at school level may include students, parents and all teaching members of staff, and at system level, the addition of policy makers and state agencies, equally as learners. Consequently, the framework necessitates an interrogation and awareness of power relations to ensure an equitable experience of listening and 'being heard' across all of the learner roles. Thus, the emphasis is on the process and experience of dialogue in pursuit of sustained practice across participants as optimal to the achievement of short term goals.

The 'Learner Voice Space' is an inclusive framework in which any student can be heard. It is predicated on the Lundy (2007) model for children's rights participation with an emphasis on the importance of 'space, voice, audience and influence'. However, it expands upon this model to
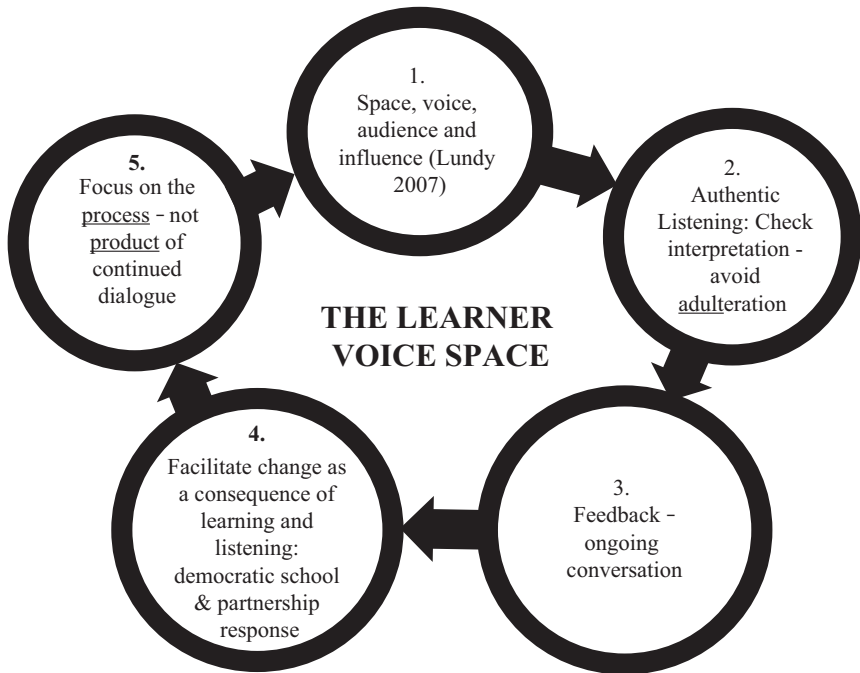
Fig. 3.1   The Learner Voice Space, adaptation of 'transformative dialogue' diagram. (Flynn, 2019, p. 39)

provide a *space* in which all participants, that is, children/young people and/or adults, are in dialogue together. Significant to this model is the presumption for 'learning' from each other as a consequence of 'listening', and therefore, all parties are 'learners'.

Any interrogation and understanding of 'voice', most particularly for societal groups, including students who are seldom heard, must also take into account the right to be heard but in protecting that right, mitigate for the potential power imbalance that may be experienced between the one that is speaking and the person who chooses to listen. The Learner Voice Space consequently requires us to ensure that any presentation or interpretation of what has been heard is authentic, to prevent the possibility of 'over-interpretation' or synthesis to the point that voices are lost. Application of this theoretical framework is also relevant to mitigate

potential 'selectiveness' across understanding and representation in dialogue with any under-represented or potentially marginalised group (Flynn 2019). It also provides for the establishment of a dialogical space in which each participant is contributing, listening and as a consequence, learning. From this, the concept that all parties are 'learners' and consequently co-learning and co-teaching is derived. Underpinning the 'Learner Voice Space' model places an emphasis on process rather than product, impressing the necessity for sustainability in practice, rather than engaging with a new initiative and most particularly, the establishment of a partnership response to managing and developing change, within a culture of embedded listening.

Summary

Data collected from students involved in the NCCA study on student connections with junior cycle reform reflect national and international literature on the links between 'having a say' and wellbeing, identified most particularly in comments which link the sense of 'feeling valued' with being heard (Flynn 2013; Simmons et al. 2015). Opportunities for students and teachers to share ideas and discover commonalities in aspirations and goals for learning within curriculum, provided tangible evidence of potential benefits in shared opportunities for communication, listening and being heard. These benefits were acknowledged by students and adults as part of this experience and resonate with Fielding's (2015) argument for '…an increasing reciprocity between generations … [and] … dialogue promoting active listening, recognition of shared concerns and collective responsibility for developing solutions' (p. 26).

Ascertaining the political and policy impact on curricular development as a consequence of the 2017 study is yet to be determined and will not emerge conclusively until curricular review and reform at both junior and senior cycles are further developed and revisited. At the time of writing, student consultation is ongoing in the Republic of Ireland on curricular development which has progressed to 'senior cycle review'. This is being conducted between the NCCA and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). At the onset of this senior cycle review,

students who had participated in the junior cycle reform study (Flynn 2017) were invited to a meeting of the NCCA Senior Cycle Board to share their views on the experience of being consulted on curricular change with a view to planning for the next stage of consultations.

The inherent challenge in fostering a climate of listening for students in education discourse is in the maintenance and progression of structures to ensure an authentic response to what has been heard. Embedding these structures as habitual practice will ensure a sustainable and credible approach to intergenerational dialogue and a democratic, shared process in curricular and education reforms.

Note

1. Comhairle na nÓg are local councils comprised of children and young people under the age of 18 and provide opportunities to become involved in the development of local services and policies.

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