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International Journal of Student Voice

A peer-reviewed, independent, open-access journal

Pennsylvania State University

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Volume 10, Number 2

IJSV

August 29, 2023

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**The Challenges in Amplifying Student Voices in Adult-Youth Partnerships in  
Education**

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**Citation:** Chapple, K., & Raftery, M. (2022). The challenges in amplifying student voices in adult-youth partnerships in education. *International Journal of Student Voice*, Volume(Number). Web link

**Abstract:** Student voice work is acknowledged as an opportunity to empower students to participate in enhancing their own school experience. This research, which aimed to amplify the voices of the student in a post-primary Irish school (students aged 13–18 years), found that there were tensions in the processes of eliciting authentic

voice. While students were very capable of making valuable contributions to the life of the school and were competent in working with adults in environments where they felt safe to give their opinions, there were difficulties in balancing the role of the adult in youth participation. In this study, student and teacher participants assessed the level of student voices within the school and coconstructed ways in which the voice of the student could be increased. Student and teacher participants engaged with two questionnaires, focus groups, and round table-style agenda discussions, designed to make the voices of students heard on the matters that were important to them. In addition to in-house data collection, an outside evaluator was engaged to support the students in coconstructing a language that supported them to speak confidently about student issues. This research is aimed at practitioners who are interested in creating conditions to help the voice of the student thrive.

**Keywords:** student voice, student contribution, student-centered approach

## **Introduction**

Student voice work in education is complex, with multifaceted and wide-ranging definitions, and generally refers to the process through which young people, individually and collectively, speak about their education (Graham, 1995; Thomson, 2011). The process of actively listening to the voices of students enables schools and teachers to better understand how students understand themselves (Davey, 2010; Neilsen & Arber, 2018), it can strengthen classroom practice (Mitra, 2018), and it has the power to reform schools (Cook-Sather, 2006; E. Thiessen, 2007). However, the vision for voice work as a panacea for the ills in school is a misconception (Lodge, 2005), and in the Irish context, little is known about the influence student voices can have in the classroom space (Skerritt et al., 2021).

Eliciting authentic voices is a difficult balancing act between listening to the needs of students on one hand and supporting young people to solve difficulties for themselves on the other. The process of inviting and incorporating student voices enables “schools and teachers to better understand how students understand themselves” and the others around them (Neilsen & Arber, 2018, p. 2). A common theme in the literature is the acknowledgment that even though there may be a cacophony of voices (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Fleming, 2013), those voices should not just be listened to. Rather, they should be given the due weight they deserve by providing them appropriate audience to have influence (Lundy, 2007). Voice is more than speech; it challenges traditional power dynamics and should lead to change (Angus et al., 2013).

Students in Ireland have been consulted in policy making and curriculum planning. In 2006, focus groups were used to develop the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum in conjunction with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). School Self-Evaluation (SSE; Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2016b) promotes the idea of dialogue with students to aid the evaluation process and improve the school experience for all parties, which advances the promotion of voice (Fleming, 2015). More recently in Ireland, the Student and Parent Charter Bill (2019), which has been approved by Seanad (the Senate or upper house of government), is currently before Dáil Eireann (the Irish Government), and is expected to become law, calls for consultation with students and their parents at the school level to assess and improve the school on an ongoing basis. Consultation can transform the position of students (Fielding & Moss, 2010; Finneran et al., 2021) to agents of change and creators of knowledge (Cook-Sather, 2007). There is evidence of significant improvement in the quality of relationships between teachers and students when they engage in consultation (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Flynn, 2014).

In many student voice research projects, students reported having increased levels of confidence, a better sense of well-being, and a feeling of connectedness to their school (Flynn, 2014; Holdsworth et al., 2007; Shier, 2001; E. Smyth, 2016; Wilson, 2009). Eliciting dialogue with students encourages the development of empathy and awareness for their own child rights and for the rights of others (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Lynch & Baker, 2005; Noddings, 2005; J. Smyth et al., 2010). In addition to these benefits, the social and personal development of the young person is

expanded while improving the whole school as well as creating a more democratic society for the future (Checkoway, 2011; Shier, 2001).

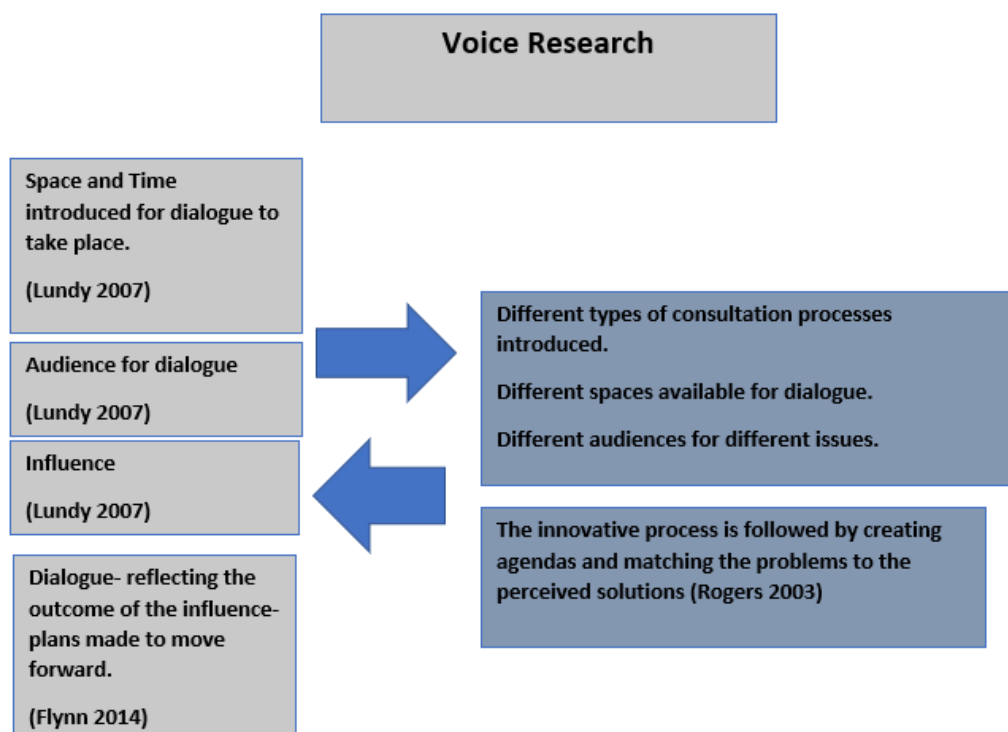
When invited to contribute, students communicate openly and insightfully, offering their own ideas and expertise (Bragg & Fielding, 2004; Checkoway, 2011; Clarke et al., 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006; James et al., 1998; Kushman, 1997; Leitch et al., 2005; McIntyre, 2000; Mitra, 2003; Pedder & McIntyre, 2006; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; D. Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007; Salim, 2015). As experts in their own environments, students can raise issues of which teachers may not have thought, like structural biases in schools, and they can make meaningful connections between their home and school lives (Mitra, 2006; Salim, 2015; Yonezawa et al., 2009). As the importance of listening to young people is increasingly recognized (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007), forms of dialogue that build an inclusive society based on respect and equality are recommended (Flynn, 2014; Higgins, 2014).

Lundy's (2007) rights-based model of participation focuses decision makers, service providers, and educators on the space, audience, and influence that need to be present to facilitate meaningful participation. This rights-based model served as a template in this research for emancipatory change by focusing on all four strands of Lundy's (2007) participation model. Lundy's (2007) model emerged from interpreting Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) to highlight the space and audience needed for children's voices to have influence. While this model (Lundy, 2007) laid the preparation for authentic voice to emerge, in this study tensions existed between student and teacher participants. The researchers

leading the project also struggled to find the “right” amount of support to provide to students who were participating—a key issue highlighted elsewhere (Mitra, 2005).

As this initiative was a new venture in the school, Rogers’s (2003) model for innovation was used. Needs were uncovered through consultations, and innovations were matched to suit the context. Then processes were clarified and adopted to embed them into everyday practice (Rogers, 2003). It is important to note that during this study the focus of the researchers was on supporting and amplifying the voice of students, and at the beginning of the study little recognition was given to the importance of support for participating teachers who may have found it emotionally challenging (Black & Mayes, 2020), a tendency that is common in student voice literature (Skerritt et al., 2022).

Implementing change was a difficult process, and we encountered some forms of resistance (Blood & Thorsborne, 2006; Watson et al., 2015). We found the employment of transformative dialogue (Flynn, 2014) useful to ensure that data were interpreted authentically, as this process kept the channels of communication open so that change could be realized. Traditional structures may not work in tandem with collaborative voice work, and opportunities may have to be sought out for students to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them (Watson et al., 2015). It was important to forge new ways of working together as one entity with the view of making gains for the whole school. An amalgamation of Flynn (2014), Lundy (2007), and Rogers (2003) was employed in this research (Figure 1).

**Figure 1***Research Design of This Voice Research Project*

### Context, Motivation, and Objectives

This study took place in a post-primary, single-sex (girls) school with an enrollment of 403. It is an urban school where the medium of instruction is the Irish language, Gaeilge. The school has an academic focus, and over 96% of students progress to university. Students in this school have a high level of parental support and are predominantly White, middle class, and Catholic.

Both researchers are employed at this school as teachers. Being insider researchers gave an understanding of the context (Mercer, 2007) but posed ethical

considerations, even though this type of education research is not uncommon (Travers, 2001). Students volunteered to be participants, and because of their overwhelmingly positive response researchers purposefully chose 32 to have representation of at least four students from each year group. If more than four volunteers presented from each year group, students were chosen at random.

The motivation for researching student voices came from a policy context as well as a genuine personal interest. The UNCRC (1989) gave young people the right to be consulted on matters that concern them and led to expansive change in many educational policies in Ireland regarding young people, such as the publication of National Children's Strategy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015), the creation of the office for the Ombudsman for Children in 2004, and the appointment of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2011 (NCCA, 2018). Ireland, like much of Europe since the mid-1990s, has had an explicit focus on the learner at the heart of the education system (Lamb, 2011; Ravenhall, 2007). Most notably, references to the voices of students in Ireland can be seen in the 1998 Education Act, which dedicated a section to the student, giving students greater involvement in the operation of their schools by developing school councils. In further policy documents, the voice of the student is embroidered into the statements of learning in the Framework for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015), school improvement policies such as School Self-Evaluation Guidelines (SSE; DES, 2016b), Looking at Our School (LAOS; DES, 2016a; Department of Education, 2022) and the Student and Parent Charter Bill (2019).



While the voice of the student is alive in policy, this research aimed to investigate if the policy translated into classroom practice (Zeldin et al., 2018). Motivation for this collaborative research stemmed from ideas generated from previous personal research where Chapple (2019) found that when students had a voice in what and how they learned, they were more interested and engaged in their work. In Raftery's (2019) research on the impact of distributed leadership on school improvement and effectiveness, she established the imperative of incorporating all the voices in the school setting to maximize school improvement and effectiveness. Both researchers felt that there was room for a more robust interrogative investigation of this subject. Using R. Hart's (1997) ladder of youth participation, the researchers aimed to seek clarification as to where participating teachers and students saw the level of voice and influence in the school setting at the beginning of the project. Participants were guided to reflect on their experiences of classroom practice and decision making, and this was used as a guide to seek ways for the voices of students to be amplified over the life of the project with the help and support of all stakeholders in the school (Manefield et al., 2007; Vukovic, 2020).

The objectives of the study were to:

- (1) Discover if there were differences between the teachers' and students' perceptions of the level of student voices in the school and what role adults play in voice work;
- (2) Implement change using student suggestions from the first questionnaire, focus groups, and agenda discussions as a catalyst, which would be a model

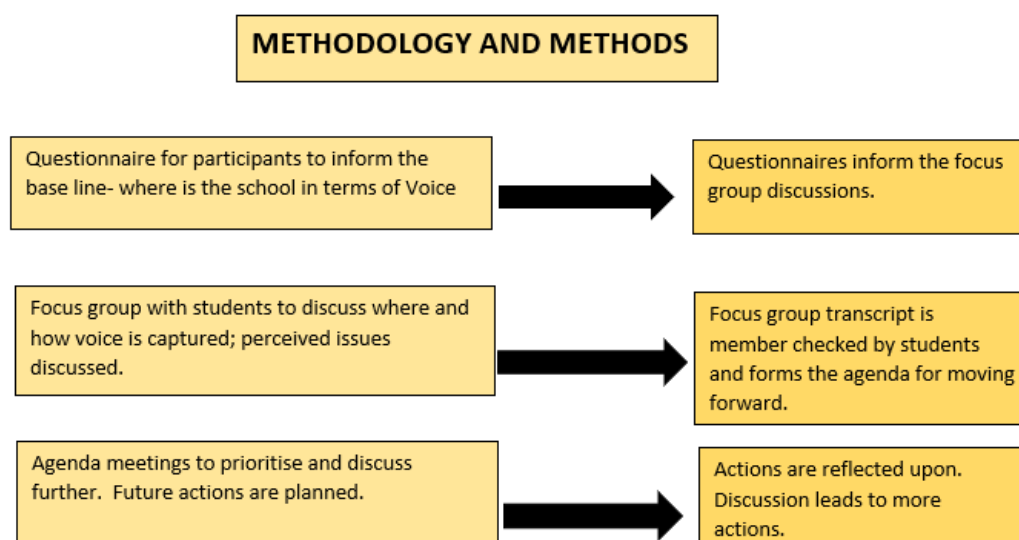
for use inside the classroom regarding the way students learn and outside the classroom in the management of the school; and

- (3) Find avenues where student voices could have influence in decision making within the school and establish a model for other settings to elicit the voices of students, and reflect on participants' experiences in the final questionnaire.

### **Methodology, Methods, and Analysis**

This case study used R. Hart's (1997) ladder of youth participation to frame the project. R. Hart (1997) used the visual of rungs on a ladder to show different levels of participation. The bottom three rungs, manipulation, decoration, and participation for show, represent little involvement whereas the highest rung on the ladder indicate that young people make decisions in partnership with adults. The data collection included consultation, discussion, and joint decision making—methods inspired by different rungs of the ladder. In this study, we used the rung as a gauge and asked participants where they saw themselves at the beginning of the project and again at the end.

The study included a phase of action research. The level of student voices was established at the beginning of the research through the first questionnaire developed by the researchers and in focus groups conducted by the researchers and an outside agency. Then an implementation occurred and was reflected upon using Lewin's (1946/1982) method of Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect. The methodology and methods are summarized in Figure 2.

**Figure 2***Methodology and Methods*

All participants, students ( $n = 32$ ) and teaching staff ( $n = 18$ ), were given time to read the participation forms and consider the implications of being part of this research (Bell, 2005; E. Hart & Bond, 1995), and a box was left in a communal area so that student participants did not have to return the forms to the researchers personally, lessening the power dynamic of saying “no” to a teacher (Hamilton, 2017).

Student and teacher participants completed the first anonymous questionnaire, distributed by email, which aimed to gauge the students’ and teachers’ perspectives of the level of student voices in the school and the avenues available for voices to be heard. In this first questionnaire participants also were asked to place where they believed we as a school were on R. Hart’s (1997) ladder of participation. This initial

phase challenged participants to identify individual incidents where voices had led to change.

While the first questionnaire responses provided a snapshot of the position of the school on R. Hart's (1997) ladder of participation, enriched consultation took place in the focus groups (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). The facilitation of the first focus groups was given to an outsider, the Youth Advocacy Programme (YAP) Ireland, an organization dedicated to changing the lives of young people who need support. YAP Ireland conducted the first student focus groups to relieve students' fear about sharing certain information, as they might have been of felt judged by a teacher-researcher who knew them. With an outsider they could "bare their souls" (Shah, 2004, p. 569). All participating students were invited to take part in the focus groups, and 15 were randomly selected from the 26 who volunteered. The lead researcher collated and transcribed data from the focus groups and arranged the data into themes. The major themes from the focus groups were reviewed by teacher and student participants with the aim of giving them a right to reply or add comment.

It was an important point to reflect and to create a plan to move forward. In line with Lundy's (2007) model for participation, students were tasked with writing up a report to provide an agenda for discussion. In the agenda discussion meetings, students discussed and prioritized issues and set about ways to achieve goals. Students were then supported and encouraged to find avenues to solve these issues for themselves. Once the first issue was acted upon, the group met again to reflect and plan to tackle the next most important issue.

The first and second (final) questionnaires from students and teachers were analyzed separately so that the perspectives of students could be compared to the perspective of teachers. Responses to qualitative questions which prompted participants to draw on incidents where voice led to change (Lundy, 2007) were transcribed, and key themes were identified and grouped into headings by the lead researcher, such as educational change, administration change, and personal change. The three student focus groups were conducted by a two-person team, with one person facilitating the group and one taking notes. These notes were used to sort the ideas into main themes, and this document was shared with all participants to withdraw, change, or add to any element.

## **Findings**

The major themes which surfaced in this research are presented below. The three themes were that students were willing to give their opinions when the opportunity is available; student voice work led to change; and discrepancies emerged in the responses, which led to tension.

### **Student Willingness to Give Opinions**

The project experienced an initial flurry of enthusiasm, with more students ( $n = 47$ ) volunteering to be part of the research than were required ( $n = 32$ ). In the focus groups, random selections had to take place as more students wished to take part than could be facilitated. In the online questionnaires, when students were given the opportunity to expand on their answers, students provided details about their

experiences in school. They were, as R. Hart (1997) recognized, a valuable asset in affecting change.

Thirty-two students were invited to complete the first online anonymous questionnaire, and 26 students responded, representing a response rate of 81%. Fourteen students (54%) said their voice was not being heard in the school. For example, students explained that in the past they have “tried to change things [but staff did] not listen” or “no action ever [came] from [their] suggestions,” and problems “[did not] always get solved.” These responses suggested that adults may have listened to students in the past, but students did not have the influence that this study aimed to achieve (Lundy, 2007). They also aligned with the fourth rung of R. Hart’s (1997) ladder, where the majority of students had placed the school’s position: young people are assigned tasks and are informed how and why they are involved in a project.

Students also noted that teachers “have their own way” of teaching and “aren’t flexible enough to deal with the way different students learn,” noting that they “have no input into teaching methods.... [We are young adults] and we should be listened to”—a feature that was evident in the literature (Skerritt et al., 2021). Students provided positive comments as well, reporting being “happy about how things [are taught]” and remarking about how “comfortable [students] felt about expressing opinions.” Students said they appreciated when teachers did not speak “down to [you]” and were “willing to help if you ask for it.” Students identified that teachers were “open to listening to problems” and “hearing opinion[s].”

In the second and final questionnaire, students reported that they thought more about their school and their learning than they had done before being involved in the research project, and they were more understanding of the mechanisms that were in place to promote student voices in the school. This feedback demonstrated that eliciting voice had a positive role in the students' awareness of their own role in the school (Flynn, 2017; Mitra, 2005; Robinson & Taylor, 2012). In the final questionnaire, the majority of students placed the school at the fifth rung of R. Hart's (1997) ladder of participation, where consultation was a key part of involvement. All student participants agreed that involvement in the study had aided them in thinking more about how and where they could use their voice in the future, highlighting the link between voice and empowerment which has come to the fore in recent years (Mitra, 2005). Students involved in the project enjoyed the social and personal responsibility that working in partnership afforded them—a key 21st-century citizenship skill (NCCA, 2018).

### **Student Voice Work as a Source of Change**

In the first questionnaire, student participants were asked if they could identify an instance where the voices of students had directly led to change. Fifty-six percent of student respondents were able to detail examples, including: “[the student council] got a new bench for a [celebrity deceased past pupil],” homework was negotiated with teachers, a Spanish class was started to accommodate students' needs, different sports teams were formed, new hand dryers were installed in the students' bathrooms, seating plans were changed at the request of students, and bullying issues were raised and resolved.

YAP Ireland worked with participating teachers to uncover examples where dialogue between students and teachers led to change. Seventeen staff members (63%) responded by giving evidence which encompassed (a) the use of resilience diaries to help make teachers more aware of student issues and concerns; (b) ideas for school trips and debutant dances being student led; (c) dialogue with subject teachers that led to adapting course content to appeal to students' interests or to suit the pace of students; (d) dialogue with students after seminars and guest speakers to assess the content; (e) changes to in-house examination timetables to make them less stressful for students; (f) support classes that were led by the needs of the student; and (g) creating new groups when requested by students, such as a junior debating team, a book club, and a mental health committee.

The primary way in which the voices of students can lead to change in a school system is the student council, which was mandated by the Education Act in 1998 (Fleming, 2015). Student participants had a mixed reaction as to the effectiveness of the student council, and many feelings aligned with the literature on the subject of councils (Forde et al., 2018). On the first questionnaire 53% of student respondents deemed it an ineffective way to be listened to. In the focus group this topic was explored further, and a student remarked that not all students in the school "have a chance to openly discuss their opinions." Another student voiced a different opinion, saying that they "would happily [bring suggestions] to the student council." One student said that they had "never experienced the student council changing anything in the school," and they were not sure "who is on it" and did not think it was "a big part of school life."



When these remarks were brought to the attention of the participants at the agenda discussion meetings, it was decided that the student council needed attention to ensure it had a role in speaking for the student body, and a way to begin this would be to hold “public” elections. At that time elections were held in class groups where students could not vote privately. By making these changes, the student council could demonstrate how its voice influenced change in the school environment. In the first questionnaire students were asked about other groups that listen to students in the school, and students named groups such as debating teams, sports teams, and well-being groups, although six student respondents (23%) could not name any.

Student and teacher participants were invited to attend agenda discussion meetings to consider together ways in which changes could be made. These meetings were conducted by the researchers, and the formal structure of the meetings during the consultative process acknowledged the seriousness of the activity (Flynn, 2017) in which their views were taken. It was important too that in these meetings the expertise of the students was considered as seriously as the expertise from teacher participants, researchers, or representatives from YAP Ireland. From these meetings, two main issues of concern emerged: improving the student council, as noted above, and improving teaching and learning.

### ***Improving the Student Council***

Students and teachers worked together in roundtable-style discussions to identify ways in which the student council could be strengthened and improved. This process reflected the vision of R. Hart’s (1997) ladder of participation, but it has not been a

prominent feature in Irish schools or indeed in other countries (Forde et al., 2018). This multivoiced approach was useful as different groups brought critical knowledge to the conversation (Keddie, 2015), and the voice of the teacher is often omitted from studies (Skerrit et al., 2022). As it was found that the student council did not communicate effectively, a school notice board was made available where meeting agendas and minutes could be displayed. It was decided that students should announce meetings on the speaker system so that the whole school would be made aware of what was happening in each student council meeting. Suggestion boxes were placed in two communal areas of the school, and a formal democratic election was planned for the following year, moving in the direction of Apple's (2011) democratic school model. In addition, students met with management to discuss excusing student council members from 10–15 minutes of class time so that meetings could be longer and not during student council representatives' lunch time, and this request was granted. Management also suggested that the council present clear goals at the beginning of the year, which would be displayed for the school to see. This feature now scaffolds the council's aims each year. It was important to support the council with these measures to offer a space and opportunity for real expression, a feature that seems to be absent in other research studies (Forde et al., 2018).

### ***Improving Teaching and Learning***

Teachers who engaged in student voice work gained insight into their own practice as well as their students' experiences (Keddie, 2015), and they saw improvements in student-teacher relationships (Flutter, 2007; Keddie, 2015). During an

agenda discussion on teaching and learning in the school between students and researchers, it emerged that students wanted teacher feedback to be more specific, exams to be shorter with more time to prepare during class time, study plans from teachers, and a continuous assessment approach in transition year (fourth-year students, aged 16). Students noted the importance of visual aids, games, availability of notes online, groupwork, interactive learning, and being listened to in class—a variety of teaching methods promoted in the literature (Keddie, 2015). This information was distributed to teachers at a staff meeting and posted to an online forum, and some teachers adapted their teaching from these suggestions, which exhibits the way voice had influence in the school (Lodge, 2005; Lundy, 2007).

### **A Discrepancy Between Teacher and Student Views**

When listening to many voices, discrepancies are bound to emerge. Overall, teachers seemed open to hearing students' insights (Keddie, 2015), but some teachers were either resistant to taking feedback or had an emotional response to student voices (Black & Mayes, 2020). In the questionnaires and focus groups, some information was put forward by students which was later challenged by participating teachers in a right to reply phase. Students' claims in the focus groups that they had the same tutor for four years or only met tutors "twice in five years" were disputed by teachers, and practice in the school proved the students' claims to be incorrect. Students also mentioned that they were receiving little information regarding upcoming events, which was challenged by a coordinating teacher who pointed out the various mechanisms in place to deliver

information: a notice board, an online calendar, announcements, emails, bulletins for parents, and a 40-minute information session every week.

Students in focus groups also mentioned that in the past they had put forward ideas to teachers, but their ideas were not followed up on. One teacher said that when students have come to her with ideas, she has asked the students to research the idea and come back to her with prices and availability. Often, she never heard about the idea again. This situation may have led to the student thinking that the teacher was going to follow up and the teacher thinking that it was the student's job. Other claims by students that the heating was turned off, that students were being injured because of lack of space, and that the communal areas were not clean and hygienic were deemed untrue by teachers and management.

Students had said that they wanted the library to be open during lunchtime, but in previous years when the library was left open at lunchtime, the room was repeatedly defaced with graffiti and litter. The library is now open at lunchtime and is supervised by a teacher. In the focus groups, students requested healthier food in the school shop and that the cost of the food should be subsidized by the school. In previous trials, healthy food remained largely unsold, and subsidizing the cost of sweets is not something in which the school would engage. The differences in opinion changed the course of the research. From this point meetings were held with students and teachers present so that dialogue and discussion could take place with support sessions for participants to navigate discussion.

## **Discussion**

This research had interesting findings regarding the perspectives of student voices from teachers' and students' views. Some of the findings were not part of the original research questions and evolved as the research moved forward. The discussion section of this article is divided into two themes based on the findings and a third theme which emerged from researcher observations during the study:

1. The discrepancy between perspectives,
2. Obtaining authentic voice, and
3. The use of volunteer participants in this qualitative insider research study.

### **The Discrepancy Between Perspectives**

Students have a unique perspective about their school that adults do not necessarily possess (Mitra, 2018; Salim, 2015), and while some of the feedback may be negative, it is still important for any organization to hear the voices of its users. Even though they may be difficult to hear, negative voices should not be erased. A young person's "authentic and unadulterated voice" (Cruddas, 2007, p. 6) is their own unique view of the way the world is.

Having said that, the inconsistencies raised in this study threatened the trust relationship between the students and teachers involved in the project. The voices of students in some cases were interpreted as strident and offensive (Fielding, 2004) and created anxiety among the teacher participants (Keddie, 2015). In hindsight, it may have been wise to step back from the intricate detail of what the students were saying and look at the bigger picture. For example, it could be recognized that students were

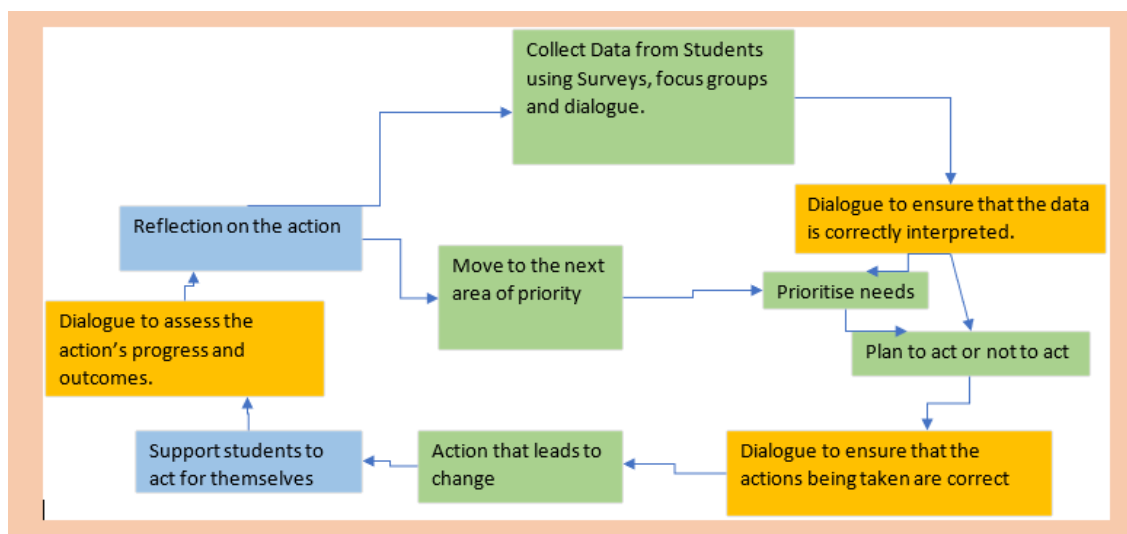
incorrect in saying that they met year heads “twice in five years,” and participating teachers could focus on pointing out the inconsistency of that statement. Alternatively, teachers could investigate the feeling that may be behind the statement. That is, is the student looking for more communication overall from the year head? Would it be pertinent to investigate how to enhance methods of communication that are currently in place, rather than discrediting the response as incorrect? One interpretation of the reactions of teachers to the inconsistencies of students’ views is that it may be that as we are forging a new directive within the school; we all need experience of collaborating. Another idea is that teachers may have viewed the voices of students as a type of surveillance that was bound to cause concerns (Keddie, 2015; Skerrett et al., 2021). We researchers were novices at working as equals with students and teachers, and it was difficult at first. It is anticipated, however, that the process will create key leaders who can be masters of voice collaboration in the future (Mitra, 2005).

An integral part of this study was to try to understand the perspectives of other people, so having all participants join in the discussion and share the responsibility of progression in an open and trustworthy way was crucial to the success of the project (Harrison et al., 2016). The focus groups, facilitated by YAP Ireland representatives, gave students a free space in which to speak about their views and matters that were important to them, without the presence of the insider researchers or other adult members of the school community. While providing this relatively “adult-free” space was seen as the best approach, it raised some challenges that may have been addressed had an adult from the school organization been present. Specifically, discrepancies may

have been resolved had a member from the school been in attendance. This hindsight raises questions: Would the student participants have spoken so freely and openly had an adult from the organization been present? Would students have curbed their answers to please a teacher who is well known to them?

Had an adult member of the school organization been present, it may have presented a chance for dialogue where different perceptions could be acknowledged. The adult insider would have known the context and may have been able to advise the student participants of key information to allay their concerns and find a way to move forward. The outsider facilitator could not understand the context and mechanisms of the school and harness a way to move the project forward.

The differences in perspectives detailed in the focus groups raised tensions and posed the question if students and teachers can ever be genuine partners, as many found this process challenging (Black & Mayes, 2020; Robinson & Taylor, 2012). Because of these tensions, the member checking or right to reply phase was very important as it gave all participants a say in the data. In addition, it changed the research design for the remainder of the project by inviting all participants to be present for agenda discussions. Originally, the design for the discussion meetings just included students and the researchers. There are lessons to be learned here regarding the importance that both the insider and the outsider play. A model (Figure 3) where all participants are present at various stages is crucial to the transparency and authenticity of the study.

**Figure 3***Model for Student Voice Work in Schools***Obtaining Authentic Voice**

Students were very capable when working with adults; they were astute and spoke of their own needs and the needs of others. “Voices are nothing without hearers” (Noyes, 2005, p. 536), but speaking for others poses its own challenges (Fielding, 2004). Student voice work is not simply the actions of hearing and listening. Rather, it involves using those voices to have real influence (Lundy, 2007). The adults who are working with the students have a difficult balancing act. On one side are the voices of students with their concerns, and on the other is the teacher who must help the students solve individual dilemmas for themselves and support them to work toward solving school system issues in collaboration with staff. For example, after the focus group, two students volunteered to write a report of their findings to present to the student council with the aim of helping to improve how the student council operated. A deadline of three



weeks was suggested by the lead researcher but was rejected by the students in favor of a six-week deadline. When the two volunteering students missed this six-week deadline, they were prompted by email and in person, and it was agreed to extend this deadline by another week. When this deadline was also missed, the lead researcher provided a computer during class time so the students could complete the report. The ideal situation would have been that the volunteering students would have completed the task by themselves. In this instance, the teacher stepped in and provided support, but there is a dilemma in this action: Are the students completing the task for themselves, or are they doing it because the teacher prompted them?

Such situations present a quandary for the supporting teachers: How do they hold students accountable and provide enough support and encouragement to get the job done? (Levy, 2016). Perhaps an apprenticeship model could be employed to scaffold the students toward leadership roles (Costello et al., 2001; Macedo, 1994). It is difficult to navigate between the adults being over-present, as it leads to student voice work being “tokenistic” (Cruddas, 2007, p. 6), and no adult presence, as it can lead to a lack of clear leadership. Effective leadership, in this case, was more about “managing the journey of change rather than announcing the destination” (Blanchard & Hodges, 2006, p. 205). There was a need here to create meaningful but not equal roles, to prepare adults to work in partnership with young people and provide internal coaching to enable young people to assume leadership roles (Camino, 2000; Mitra, 2009; Richards-Schuster & Timmermans, 2017).

In a similar vein, it was difficult to keep the enthusiasm for the project going. While many student and teacher participants were excited at the beginning, this attitude waned over the life of the project. In the first questionnaire 81% of students took part, but in the second and final questionnaire less than 60% took part. When meetings were held within class time, attendance was double than when meetings were held outside class time. Because of this trend, a *half in class time, half out of class time* structure was adopted for the future. At times the agenda discussions lost focus when it seemed as though students were presenting a list of items for teachers to fix; these discussions were intended to be dialogue created between both parties to work out strategies to progress together. Having meaningful engagement is challenging, and it is important that students have an authentic response (Flynn, 2014). It was clear from this research, however, that an adult driving force needed to be at the helm of the project to keep it moving forward and to model leadership roles for the future (Mitra, 2005).

Researchers also found it difficult to address the issues students put forward as small changes were the only ones possible within the study timeframe. However, these small gains were important for trust building and leadership skills (Mitra, 2005). Students who cooperate in a process such as this study are entitled to see outcomes that affect their lives as they “will tire of increasing demands for their voice without changes taking place, (Fielding, 2004, pp. 306–307). However, the goals cannot be unrealistic on the part of both students and teachers (Blood & Thorsborne, 2006; Keddie, 2015). If the adult promises to listen to the voice of the student and then takes no action, whether that action is in aligned with student suggestions or not, it can cause

alienation and disconnection (Mitra, 2018). Finding the balance of too much vs. too little adult participation was a difficult task: Too much, and students do not become true problem solvers; too little, and student voice becomes diffused and ineffective (Salim, 2015).

The balance is also difficult to maintain as participating groups must constantly push against the normative forces that usually define the roles of students and teachers (Mitra, 2018; Skerit et al., 2022). To address this challenge, at the end of the project, a model representing the journey that this project took and the lessons learned was collated and formed into a transferrable template. The model (Figure 3) places dialogue at the very center of every step, ensuring that young people and adults participate at every step of voice work. This model does not eliminate the voice of the adult, but the adult voice should provide a supportive and reflective role in this action research.

## **Volunteers**

In this case study, volunteer student and teacher participants were sought by inviting everyone to the conversation. Volunteering attracts a certain section of the student and teacher population, and had random selection taken place, the chance of including voices from students and teachers who may usually be excluded from the decision-making process would have been increased (NCCA, 2018). Student voice work can be scrutinized because an uneven distribution of opportunities for voice may be felt by a certain group of students, namely the confident, engaged, self-assured student vs. students who may be excluded from the process (Finneran et al., 2021; Lodge, 2005). We also must respect that if students prefer to remain silent and do not

wish to respond, that choice too is a powerful political act, signaling that students believe it is not safe or worthwhile to speak (NCCA, 2018). This study included less than 10% of the entire student body, and for future research, we must include an acknowledgment of potential bias among the volunteering participant sample as we may be engaging with the already engaged.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this research project was to analyze the level of student voice in one post-primary school in Ireland and find ways in which the students could be heard and work toward a higher rung on R. Hart's (1997) ladder of youth participation. This research found that inviting students to the discussion table is not enough; the adults involved need to play a balancing role by being supportive when needed and stepping back when students have the confidence to support themselves while understanding that the adult's voice can never be invisible (Cruddas, 2007). Initiatives that exclude the teacher altogether have limited success and have little chance of sustainability (Fielding, 2004). Establishing a trusting relationship while working together in a model in which students and teachers play different roles takes time. If students and teachers are supported, they will rise to the challenge in a culture of inclusion (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018; Fleming, 2015). Trust is most certainly gained when adults speak *to* rather than speak *for* students (Spivak, 1988). The adults need to be aware that their own biases infiltrate the voice of the young person (Alcoff, 1992) so speaking to must be speaking to *with an open mind*. The redistribution of power from students' low level of voice to their involvement in matters that affect them is a gradual process and not easily achieved

(Fitzpatrick et al., 2018; Harrison et al., 2016). Change is slow; expecting students to become autonomous in affecting change was a lot to ask for over the life of the project. Change in the amplification of the voice of the student requires active engagement from key staff, not just one or two staff members; a significant proportion of colleagues is necessary for it to become habitual (Blood & Thorsborne, 2006; Fielding, 2004; Flynn, 2017).

In this research, the road to change was not uncomplicated, and issues were raised about authentic voice and the difficulty in insider voice research. Students need to move from areas where they have limited leadership, such as speaking at conferences and planning school dances, to being part of the discussion (Harrison et al., 2016; R. Hart, 1997; Mitra, 2018). This project was a direct effort to accomplish non-tokenistic inclusion and to climb R. Hart's (1997) ladder of participation to generate the sense of belonging that working in partnership with students creates in a school. Partnerships of any kind take nurturing and care to develop, but with time, support, and a clear vision for improvement, eliciting the voices of students can assist in strengthening adult-youth partnerships in education.

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The International Journal of Student Voice (IJSV) is a peer-reviewed, open access e-journal publishing on the ways in which students co-lead their schools and communities by collaborating with teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders to define problems and develop potential solutions and/or take the lead on making change in their schools and communities. We define students to include a wide range of young people, from early childhood to university studies. Taking as foundational the right of students to develop their voices and leadership capabilities and take an active role in analyzing and shaping their educational experiences, the journal publishes research related to pupil/learner voice, youth-adult partnerships, child rights, youth participatory action research, students as activists and change agents, and related fields. Likewise, we

acknowledge the importance of adult educational stakeholders who share this belief and work to make the development of student voice, participation, and partnership a reality.

IJSV, established in 2015 by the Pennsylvania State University, welcomes pieces from researchers, practitioners, and students including traditional research-focused articles, practitioner reflections, and multi-media submissions. Peer review in this journal will include feedback from researchers, practitioners and students. All articles must have a user-friendly abstract that is understood by all audiences. Articles will be expected to end with a set of discussion questions to encourage online dialogue. Each submission will include a discussion forum to encourage conversation about the submissions.

For additional information, please go to the IJSV website: <https://ijsv.psu.edu>

Or contact Dana Mitra at: [dana@psu.edu](mailto:dana@psu.edu)