

Student Voice: An Emerging Discourse in Irish Education Policy

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Abstract

In positioning student voice within the Irish education policy discourse it is imperative that this emergent and complex concept is explored and theorized in the context of its definition and motivation. Student voice can then be positioned and critiqued as it emerged within Irish education policy primarily following Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Charter on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992. Initially emerging in policy from a rights-based and democratic citizenship perspective, the student council became the principal construct for student voice in Irish post-primary schools. While central to the policy discourse, the student council construct has become tokenistic and redundant in practice. School evaluation policy, both external and internal, became a further catalyst for student voice in Ireland. Both processes further challenge and contest the motivation for student voice and point to the concept as an instrument for school improvement and performativity that lacks any centrality for a person-centered, rights-based, dialogic and consultative student voice within an inclusive classroom and school culture.

Keywords: Student voice, Student council, Evaluation, Performativity, Citizenship.

Student voice: Definition, Theorised, Motivation, Contested

Definition

Student voice as an emergent and complex concept refers to students in dialogue, discussion and consultation on issues that concern them in relation to their education, but in particular, in relation to pedagogy and their experiences of schooling whether as a student cohort, individual class groups or within a forum construct like a student council (Fleming, 2013). Thus, the concept is both defined and described by a wide range of terms and activities that centre on the repositioning of students to facilitate their engagement with their teachers and schools. Across a range of research, instructional literature and policy documents on student voice, the language and terminology relating to the concept includes variously: 'participation of students', 'involvement of students', 'listening to students', 'consulting with students', 'dialogue with students', 'researching with students', 'students' perceptions', 'students' perspectives', 'evaluation by students' and 'empowering of students'. These terms are used, often interchangeably, in research and in descriptions of activities that reference the concept of student voice as students being engaged in

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interaction with peers, teachers and school authorities on matters and issues that affect them in their school experiences (ibid).

Rudduck (2005) positions the student as the object in a process of conversations directed by teachers seeking advice and inviting opinion and perspective from students, and seeking to re-engage the dis-engaged through student voice. This is a theme that emerges throughout student voice literature (Arnot, McIntyre, Pedder and Reay, 2004; Mitra, 2001, 2004, 2007; Nieto, 1994; Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; SooHoo, 1993).

Fielding and McGregor (2005) emphasize student voice as reflection, dialogue and action combined with discussion as 'student voice covers a range of activities that encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action on matters that primarily concern students' (ibid, p.2).

Thomson (2011) focuses on facilitating the child or young person to be agentive in the context of their education. This points to a rights-based definition as 'student voice refers to the process through which children and young people, individually and collectively are able to speak up about their education (ibid, p.24). Being 'able' indicates facilitation towards agency and suggests the right of students to have an individual or collective voice, which has volume in pursuit of action. Cook-Sather (2006) further references students' rights and introduces 'power' within the school hierarchical structure in a definition that seeks 'meaningful acknowledged presence' for students implying a change from a position of silence to active engaged participant. For Cook-Sather, with this acknowledgement of position comes 'the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools' (ibid., p.363). A further development of the concept envisions students not only as having a voice, an involvement, and a consultative role in schools, but also acting as participants in critical analysis and research directed at school reform (Thiessen, 2007). Thiessen positions student voice as co-construction of the school experience, as students become co-participants and researchers within analysis and reform. These 'initiatives', it is argued, represent a deep and agentive student voice pointing to a rights-based, emancipatory and democratic orientation for the concept.

Theorized

Student voice is theorized within three frames; the voice of the student in the classroom within a socio-cultural theoretical frame that views learning as a social interaction and pedagogy as social constructivism; within a social constructionist theoretical frame that views student voice as dialogue, communication and consultation in classrooms and schools, and through a poststructural theoretical frame that challenges the concept in its assumption that a universal, individual or authentic student voice exists (Fleming, 2013).

Social constructivism positions student voice as the engaged and agentive voices of students in school settings. This is central to participation in the co-construction of knowledge in the classroom.

A social constructionist framing reflects a student voice that questions and challenges discourse and practice framed within democracy and active citizenship. This is a student voice of critical pedagogy, emancipation and transformation whether in the classroom or at whole-school level.

A post-structural framing positions student voice as complex, contradictory and challenging, and situated within a discourse of power and inequity in their schools and classrooms. This theoretical framing contests both the social constructivist framing of student voice as agentive and interactive in a social context of learning and a constructionist framing of voice as dialogic, consultative and emancipatory, as both are

bounded by a power discourse that controls and limits these voices through meanings, constructs and assigned roles and positions that are established and reinforced by practice, authority and imposed policy in schools and classrooms. (ibid)

Motivation

Autonomy for children in decision-making relating to life choices was a central argument within a rights-based framing of student voice (Dworkin, 1977). Student voice can be placed within this self-determining, rights-based agenda as recognition of 'the moral integrity of children, entitled to equal concern and respect, and entitled to have their autonomy and self-determination recognised' (Freeman, 1987, p. 309). Linked to these arguments is the repositioning of children as developing citizens within a democracy with an entitlement and a right to a voice (ibid).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, followed by the ratification of the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992, by all countries with the exception of the USA and Somalia, were the significant milestones in advancing student voice in the context children's rights. Article 12 of the charter required that:

- 1) States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
- 2) For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (UNCRC Article 12:1,2, 1992)

Ratification of the charter was seen as significant in positioning the child as a full human being with the ability to participate freely in society (Freeman, 1996). It principally focused the argument for the right of the child to be consulted in...'all matters affecting the child' (UNCRC, 1992). Article 12 combines the aforementioned needs of the child in terms of provision and protection with their right to participate in decision-making. Thus 'it brings together the familiar view of children as in need of protection and provision...with a different view, of children as individuals in their own right, as 'social actors' who can form and express opinions, participate in decision-making processes and influence solutions' (Bragg, 2007, p. 11).

The obligation to incorporate the charter into the legal framework of a country is widely viewed as the catalyst for the development of what became termed as 'student voice' in many ratifying countries (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000). It is noteworthy however that the United States government did not ratify the convention due to concerns about the perceived erosion of the authority of adults (Kilbourne, 1998).

While contested, the widespread and varied translation of the obligations of article 12 advanced student voice actions and initiatives, and became the framework for policy development and strategies in many jurisdictions (Noyes, 2005). However, Lundy (2007) argued that the obligations to transpose Article 12 into policy and legislation required two elements to be provided to children: the right to express a view; and the right to have the view given due weight. Four conditions or structures were identified to fully realize the potential of article 12 as the foundation for deep and meaningful student voice: space within which children can express a view; voice to allow them to express their views; an audience that will listen; and that their expressed views will stimulate a response and action (ibid.). Lundy strongly questions the motivation, beyond the rhetoric, of policy

makers and schools to provide the four identified conditions for the development of a meaningful student voice within this rights-based framework.

The promotion of personalized learning within education policy in England can also be viewed as a further motivation of student voice from a rights-based perspective. Personalization of learning, as an education policy initiative, focused on ensuring that the learning needs of individual students were addressed in schools and classrooms (Hargreaves, 2004; Ruddock, 2006). Using the voices of students was viewed as a key element of personalized learning. Personalization required schools to prioritize engagement with learning, personal responsibility for learning, independent learning and the development of confidence and maturity in students (DfES, 2004), to be achieved through teachers and students working together to improve learning (Hargreaves, 2004). Student voice was identified as one of the nine gateways to personalized learning that facilitated students 'to play a more active role in their education and schooling as a direct result of teachers becoming more attentive, in sustained or routine ways, to what students say about their experience of learning and of school life' (ibid., p. 7). However, Fielding and others challenged student voice in this context, as a neo-liberal administrative strategy aimed at school improvement and performativity rather than at the person-centered learning needs of the individual student (Fielding, 2007).

Engagement in decision-making from a democratic active-citizenship perspective is highlighted throughout student voice research as a further motivation. Education for democracy and active citizenship, has emphasized the reinforcing of human-rights based values, the empowerment of stake holders and the involvement of staff, students and parents in all important school decisions (Dürr, 2004). Dürr however argues that while active citizenship requires involvement, debate and participation by students and the school recognized as 'the preparatory system for citizenship' (ibid., p. 12), the actual involvement of students in co-responsibility and decision-making has been very limited. In many countries, the need for citizenship education became a concern and the creation of school (student) councils and the provision of taught citizenship programmes was the policy response. The Crick Report (1998) recommended the introduction of a programme for citizenship into the National Curriculum in the UK. The introduction of Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) into the Irish Junior Cycle curriculum in 1995 (DES, 1995), and the planned implementation of 'Politics and Society' for senior cycle (NCCA, 2009), marked a similar curricular response in Ireland. However, it is contended that teaching and learning about democracy will fail unless it takes place within a democratic educational framework and environment (Dürr, 2004). It is equally argued that education for democratic citizenship cannot be taught but must be experienced by students (Huddleston, 2007; Kelly, 1995; McCowen, 2011).

The student or school council therefore became the principal policy-driven participatory democratic structure in Irish and UK schools with the dual role of providing an opportunity for lived representative prefigurative democracy and a construct to articulate student voice in schools.

Contested

Social constructionist, postmodernist and poststructuralist theorists argue against the notion of a universal truth (or a universal voice) within the web of social, emotional, linguistic, political and communicative experiences and contexts (MacNaughton, 2003). Within a postmodern and poststructural perspective, knowledge is complex, contradictory and subject to change and challenge (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). They argue that the concept of student voice should therefore be bounded in both the context and the culture of specific settings and is complex, challenging and contradictory. There is a

complex and diverse range of voices many that can make difficult listening (Bragg, 2001; Fielding, 2004). These voices are contextualized and constructed by power relationships and authority in particular contexts and are circumscribed by issues including age, race, gender and class. Engagement of student voice practice therefore has the potential to expose actions and meanings in a classroom by highlighting inequity and issues of exclusion. It can equally free those who are confined or silenced by that context (Taylor and Robinson, 2009).

Student voice should therefore be situated in relation to power discourses, gender, class and race that operate in schools and classrooms and the range of other agendas whether rights-based, democratic, or consumerist at the wider policy level (Bragg, 2007). Deconstructing the concept even from its broadest definition points to a 'cacophony of competing voices' (Reay, 2006, p. 179) that can be listened to and heard in schools. A deeper analysis of the concept, therefore points to the power positioning of voice in a compulsory school system where the volume of student voice, the extent to which voices are heard, and the awareness of those that are silent or silenced are concerns (Arnot, McIntyre, Pedder and Reay, 2004; Fielding, 2001). Who is facilitated to speak, who is listening and the question of provision of pedagogical and physical spaces in schools for dialogue (Fielding, 2001, Lundy, 2007) are further challenges to any view of student voice. Reference to an authentic student voice is also challenged as being dependent on the issues raised by those voices that may be privileged to speak, the questions asked of them, and the values and assumptions of those who are asking and of those who are listening (Chadderton, 2011; Connolly, 1997).

Students may also express views and opinions that teachers and schools find challenging and unacceptable (Mitra, 2003). Teachers' use of adult language and accepted school cultural norms to interpret student-teacher dialogue can also question the validity and integrity of that dialogue (Bragg, 2001). The challenge for student voice in practice is, at one level, the difficulty of facilitating empowerment of those whose 'voices have been silenced or distorted by oppressive cultural and educational formations' (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 309) without directing students or imposing another discourse reflecting the values of the teacher (*ibid.*). At a deeper level the challenge for the teacher in the classroom is to develop strategies to allow the diversity of students' voices to be heard through dialogue so as to expose how their experiences have differed based on their perceived social position relative to others (*ibid.*).

Student voice, while motivated by right, prefigurative democracy and active citizenship, must thus be viewed through the lens of power. Power is expressed in and is exercised through discourse (Foucault, 1979). Foucault saw social institutions sustaining themselves through a discourse of truths that defined actions (Gore, 1993). These truths identified and sustained what was valued and privileged. Awareness of distortion, privilege and silence allows us to understand how meaning and discourse are constructed (Foucault, 1979). Discourse viewed as what is said, who speaks and with what authority, is central to Foucault's analysis of the complexity of power and its possession in an organization. Discourses and meanings however, arise from practices and not from written policy or the spoken word (Ball, 1990). Those with power control discourse through dividing practices, which limit the freedom and identity of members of the organization (Marshall, 1990). Foucault's principal of discontinuity further points to discourses and practices that can and do change their meaning as they are deployed at different levels of an organization and are received by different members. It is argued that the range of interpretations, affordances and limitations to student voice must also be viewed through the lenses of dividing practices and the discontinuity of discourse.

Foucault's envisioning of power and how it permeates the school presents a significant critical challenge to student voice as an emancipating, inclusive and equalizing concept (Fleming, 2013). Institutionalized practices translated into the Irish post-primary school context are grounded in a discourse that focuses students' learning on a curriculum and examination that reflects the needs of the economy and the adult world and that does not permit consultation with student on decisions in schools or classrooms (ibid.). In this context, students are classified by age and labelled and numbered by group, ability level and programme. The daily experience of students in Irish schools suggests that the voices of school management and teachers are privileged above those of students and parents (Devine, 2001 2002, 2003, 2009; Lynch and Lodge, 2002).

Using the lens of Foucault, it is argued that student voice as consultation, dialogue, partnership and participation in a school structure will be challenged and limited by the dominant power / knowledge discourse, by the policy discourse of schools and education authorities, and by discontinuity in the way discourses are internalized and normalized within school culture. In the context of Ireland and England, examination and surveillance in the context of the centrality of curriculum delivery and internal or externally based assessments of students, or overall school performance, have created a performance-orientated and outcomes-driven script for teachers reflective of a neo-liberal and consumerist agenda (Arnot and Reay, 2007; Fielding, 2007, 2011; Lodge, 2005, 2008). Student voice initiatives risk tokenism within the constraints of these discordant discourses and the power hierarchy of student, teacher, principal and government, which seeks to preserve, rather than challenge or transform (Taylor and Robinson, 2009).

Student voice is therefore visualized as an on-going process that is contextualized, situated and negotiated in a contested space (Taylor and Robinson, 2009). A poststructural and postmodern theoretical articulation of student voice points to an appreciation of the complexity and challenge of the interaction of power with any authentic and emerging student voice in schools. The utopian notion of one unifying authentic student voice, reflecting equality, justice and democracy (Ellsworth, 1998), is dismissed, and new meanings, different interpretations, and a variety of discourses are visualised (Taylor and Robinson, 2009).

The student voice policy discourse in Ireland

As in other jurisdictions, the concept of student voice emerged in the Irish educational policy discourse following the ratification of the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992. Article 12 forms the basis for policy development relating to participation and consultation with children in relation to matters that might affect them. In educational policy in Ireland, the 'actioning' of the requirements of the UNCRC article 12 has resulted primarily and almost exclusively in the formation of student councils in post-primary schools.

A period of partnership in policy development that emerged in Irish education in the latter years of the twentieth century (Devine, 2004; Granville, 2004; Trant and Ó Donnabháin, 1998), and reached an important focus in the National Education Convention in 1994. The convention, which involved all education stakeholders, with the exception of student representatives, resulted in the drafting of the White Paper on Education (1995) that informed the Education Act (1998). The report of the convention made very limited reference to any role for students in decision-making or school governance. It did however make reference to the desirability of 'a shared dialogue on the core values of the school, embracing the patron, trustees, board, principal, staff, parents and students' (National Education Convention Secretariat, 1994, p. 28).

The White Paper on Education in 1995 was first to mention a student council in policy as a mechanism for student participation in schools:

Likewise, school policies should be developed in close consultation with parents, and with students where appropriate. In order to facilitate this consultation, the board of management of each second-level school will be encouraged to promote the formation of a students' council, which will work in collaboration with the staff and the parents' association (Government of Ireland, 1995, p.181).

Student voice, envisioned as a consultative role, was positioned in the policy discourse for the first time by this single reference to a student council. The role was envisioned as one of consultation on school planning within a structure that was promoted by the board of management. While the conditionality of 'where appropriate' was used, and both control and power were vested with the board of management, this represented an aspiration for meaningful involvement of students (and parents) in a significant aspect of the work of the school. These involvements were structured solely within the establishment of student councils in schools.

The Education Act (1998) made first mention of a role for students in its outline of the functions of the school principal. This role was envisaged as consultation in relation to school objectives as 'under the direction of the board and, in consultation with the teachers, the parents and, to the extent appropriate to their age and experience, the students, set objectives for the school and monitor the achievement of those objectives' (Education Act, 1998, 23:2).

While students were mentioned in the context of consultation appropriate to their age and experience, the imbalance in favour of the roles for parents, teachers and staff in following subsections was obvious, as the principal 'shall encourage the involvement of parents of students in the school in the education of those students and in the achievement of the objectives of the school' (ibid., 23:2), and 'wherever practicable, the principal shall, in exercising his or her functions under this section, consult with teachers and other staff of the school' (ibid., 23:6).

Mention of students was excluded from this consultation process. A role for students in the school received further attention however, in reference to communication with students, their involvement in the school, and through the establishment of a student council:

A board shall establish and maintain procedures for the purposes of informing students in a school of the activities of the school (ibid., 27:1)

and the board:

Shall facilitate the involvement of the students in the operation of the school, having regard to the age and experience of the students, in association with their parents and teachers (ibid., 27:1)

The establishment and maintenance of these procedures was not outlined or developed in the act although the establishment of a student council was given some more attention:

Students of a post-primary school may establish a student council (ibid., 27:3).

Nevertheless, though the act provided for the establishment of a council, it was made clear that such a council was not obligatory, and therefore it 'may' rather than 'should' or 'shall' be established. The function of the council was outlined as:

'a student council shall promote the interests of the school and the involvement of students in the affairs of the school' (ibid., 27:3).

Section 27 of the act represents the key defining reference to student voice in the policy discourse in Ireland at this time and has defined developments, specifically in relation to the role of the council in the school, to date. It placed promotion of the interests of the school as a primary function of the council, followed by the secondary role of 'involvement of students in the affairs of the school'. This represented a significant reduction in the role of the council from that of consultation on policy development as envisaged in the White Paper (1995) and reflected a very limited role in decision-making. The act was not specific on how involvement in the affairs of the schools might be structured or operationalised. Clearly, power and control of the council was vested in the board of management as:

'the rules for the establishment of a student council shall be drawn up by the board' (ibid., 27:4).

The National Children's Strategy (2000) was the key national strategic document that was developed in response to the requirements of ratification of the UNCRC in 1992. It represented 'a major initiative to progress the implementation of the convention' (National Children's Strategy, 2000, p. 6) and set out a vision based on democratic citizenship and participation for 'an Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own' (ibid., p. 4). In the context of education, the strategy reflected the Education Act (1998) by focusing on the establishment of 'school' (student) councils and by channelling student voice through this construct with an emphasis on the development of democratic citizenship:

The education system has a special role in developing children's sense of civic responsibility. School councils are being established to give children at post-primary level a direct involvement in the running of their schools (ibid., p. 31).

It is noteworthy that this strategy document envisaged the most significant role for students and student councils in the context of democracy and citizenship. It pointed to students having... 'a direct involvement in the running of their schools', in contrast to... 'the involvement of students in the affairs of the school' (Education Act, 1998, 27:4).

In a further response to the UNCRC (1992), a National Children's Office within the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) was established in 2001, as was the office of the Ombudsman for Children, following the enactment of the Ombudsman for Children Act in 2002. Both developments highlight a changing position for the children's rights discourse in Irish society.

Ten years later, in 2012, the thirty-first amendment to the Irish Constitution (1937) replaced article 42 with a more developed and elaborated text primarily focusing of the rights of children in judicial proceedings and in the care of the State. The insertion of section 4.2 into the amended article 42A (Referendum Commission, 2012) directly reflected the wording and the intention of the UNCRC (1992) particularly in the provision, by law, for the need to engage with the views of the child.

While the amendment clearly establishes the rights of the child under the constitution, its provision for the voice of the child to be heard concerns children in care, adoption, guardianship, custody and access issues following judicial proceedings. The discussion and subsequent passing into law of the amendment however heightened public awareness of consultation with children in wider public discourse and particularly in the interfaces between the child and State services, including schools.

The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 – 2020 (2014) has become the most recent element of the national policy discourse that has informed the emergence of student voice. The strategy identifies 'listening to and involving children and young people' as one of six transformational goals. Commitments arising from this goal

include 'consultation with children and young people on policies and issues that affect their lives' and the creation of 'mechanisms to provide children and young people with the opportunity to be heard in primary and post-primary schools through student councils or other age-appropriate mechanisms.' (ibid., p 32)

Student voice as positioned in Irish post-primary schools

The exclusion of children from policy and decision-making at school level has been recognised throughout the period since the National Education Convention (1994). The absence of children or students from this early partnership process has been noted, as was the absence of any overarching policy for the inclusion or participation of children in decision-making. Devine, (2004) outlined the position of student voice in the context of the power and authority of schools highlighting its 'adult-centred terms, with children confined to independent initiatives in schools rather than through any prescribed obligation to include their voice on policy decisions made (ibid., p. 115). However, Devine also notes that though students were largely excluded, the increased involvement of parents could only be viewed as a positive development pointing towards a gradual shift in power positioning within education and schools to a situation where 'children, as is increasingly the case with parents, are perceived along with teachers, to be partners in education with a voice to be heard and expressed' (ibid., p. 124).

Despite this, a more pessimistic and exclusionary view has also been articulated in terms of equality and the inclusion of the voices of the marginalized, including students from minority groups and those with special educational needs, as Lodge, Devine and Deegan (2004) recognized that 'some voices came to be excluded and marginalized, while others continue to be prioritized' (ibid., p. 3); a finding that was both recognized by Shevlin and Rose (2003) and challenged through advocacy for a personalized and situated student voice (Rose and Shevlin, 2010).

Arising from the Education Act (1998), the student council became the central and only construct that could provide a platform for students' inclusion and participation in decision-making in schools and equally provide an experience of prefigurative democracy and active citizenship.

It was the publication of the guidelines document for schools: 'Student Councils: A Voice for Students', by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 2002 that provided some guidance on how the council should be established and developed. The title of the document, the only such guidelines to be published, directly linked the student council to student voice, and placed the concept of voice as central to the student council. The document used the terms 'involvement' and 'partnership' and made reference to 'the affairs of the school' and 'for the benefit of the school', but, reflecting the text of the Education Act (1998), at no point referred to consultation and dialogue, or any central role for students in decision-making. Nevertheless, the guidelines did extend and deepen the policy discourse on the role of the student council, perceiving it as representing the views of the student body to school management, promoting good communication, and supporting educational development and students' contribution to policy development (DES, 2002). An additional action, that of 'assisting', a term that is not used in earlier documents or in the Education Act, was also introduced in the guidelines document. This additional role of the council was envisaged as 'assisting with induction of new students, assisting with sporting and cultural activities, and assisting with fundraising events for charity' (ibid., p. 11).

The verbs used throughout this document to describe the work of the council include: representing; promoting; supporting; contributing, and assisting. These terms outline the limitations placed on the role of a student council as envisaged by the Department of

Education and Skills, in 2002, a role that can be viewed as supportive and advisory but not as consultative or dialogic. These guidelines also reflect a reductionist view of the role and potential of the council as an instrument for student voice in a post-primary school setting. The student council as a construct, and the language used to describe its role, limited any sense of empowerment as envisaged by any general interpretation of the UNCRC that referred to 'the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child' (UNCRC, Article 12:1, 1992). Any potential for empowerment and transformation was merely envisioned as an 'involvement in the affairs of the school' (Education Act, 1998, 27:3). The potential for a transformative voice or role for the students had been significantly diminished by the text of these guidelines. When interrogated, the roles suggest very limited and vague involvements for students in consultation, dialogue and participation in the running of schools and in school decision-making. It is equally questionable whether the student council construct and role, as outlined in the guidelines document, is provided with space, voice, audience and a facility for response in schools (Lundy, 2007) to allow for the development of a deep and meaningful voice for students.

No further written policy direction was provided to post-primary schools relating to the student council although a support service was established which provided training and support literature for students, schools and student council liaison teachers between 2002 and 2011.

The student council: definition and role

The aforementioned Department of Education and Science guidelines document 'Student Councils: a voice for students' (2002) is the only policy document to provide a definition of the structure and role of a council in an Irish post-primary school setting. A student council was set out as 'a representative structure through which students in a post-primary school can become involved in the affairs of the school, working in partnership with the school management and staff and parents for the benefit of the school and its students' (DES, 2002, p. 8).

This definition utilized the wording of the Education Act (1998), focusing on 'involvement in the affairs of the school', but introduced the idea of a partnership and the representative nature of the council. The inclusion of these terms pointed towards an agenda of participative democracy and active citizenship 'for the benefit' of all stakeholders.

This envisioning of the role of the council can be viewed in particular contrast to that of the Education Act, UK (2002) that outlined the requirement for English schools to consult students about decisions that affect them. The Education and Skills Act, UK, (2008) further extended student voice, as the governing body of a school was required to appropriately consider the views of students when making decisions. An early description of a student council identified 'a body, in part nominated or elected by pupils which meets from time to time from weekly to annually and whose chief function is to advise the school authorities or to take decisions which they may or may not implement' (Chapman, 1970a, p. 268). A later description of student councils by the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2008) reflected a greater emphasis on representative democracy, but with a particular reference to partnership with students in their education. Student councils in this definition were 'democratically elected groups of students who represent their peers and enable students to become partners in their own education, making a positive contribution to the school environment and ethos' (School Councils UK, cited by Whitty and Wisby, 2007, p. 30).

A more simplified description of the construct focused on the representative nature of a council as a means of presenting students' views was outlined in research carried out in

advance of promoting the establishment of student councils in Northern Ireland viewing a school council as 'a group of pupils within a school, elected by their peers to represent them and their views' (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2011, p. 4).

Based on the experience of the growth and development of student councils in Scottish schools over time 'the dominant model of a pupil council in Scotland today is one in which a reasonably representative group of students are elected as pupil councilors and perform a consultative and collaborative influencing role within their schools, particularly around school life issues of direct and immediate importance to students themselves' (Children in Scotland, 2010, p. 8). Scottish councils emphasize a deeper role of influence for the student council through reference to consultation and collaboration with a focus on issues that impact directly on students.

Wales is the only jurisdiction in the UK that requires schools to establish a student council (Welsh Assembly Government, 2005). The Welsh Assembly Government provides a detailed outline of a council that includes direction on roles and involvements in planning, governance and recruitment of staff. In the Welsh context a school council is seen as:

A group of pupils elected by their fellow pupils to represent their opinions and raise issues with the headteacher and governors in the school. The school council can also take forward projects on behalf of the pupils, and be involved in planning and things like the School Development Plan, governing body meetings and interviewing staff (ibid.).

These definitions from policy makers in five jurisdictions on the islands of Ireland and Britain emphasize a representative democratic and participative role for student councils. They focus particularly on the elected, representative nature of the council that has a varying and sometimes unspecified role in school activities and decision-making. The range of emphases however, extends from students' involvement and partnership, to advice, consultation and collaboration, and to deeper involvements in school decision-making.

The extent to which student councils had been established in schools equally varied across the jurisdictions cited. A total of 68% of Irish post-primary schools were found to have a functioning student council in operation in a survey completed by the Democracy Commission (2005). In Scotland, 90% of schools had 'whole school' pupil councils (Children in Scotland, 2010), while 95% of schools in England were found to have functioning school councils (Whitty and Wisby, 2007). Since 2005, all publicly funded schools in Wales were required to have a student council (Welsh Assembly Government, 2005, 2009) while the Department of Education in Northern Ireland was actively supporting the establishment of student councils in 2011 (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2011).

A critique of the student council construct in Irish education

The growth in student councils in Irish post-primary schools was initially viewed in the context of enabling participation, responsibility and accountability on the part of students and thereby providing an important exercise in democracy (O'Gorman, 1998). The limited but more recent research on student councils in Ireland however reveals a different perspective.

Tokenism and limited democratic engagement in decision-making has been an ongoing and regularly cited feature of students' perception of school or student councils across all five jurisdictions. This criticism challenges the concept of a student council as an instrument of student voice and as a construct for representative democratic participation

(Alderson, 2000; Fielding, 2007, 2011; Hargreaves, 2004; Keogh and Whyte, 2005; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; Whitty and Wisby, 2007; Wyse, 2001).

An experimental student council in an Irish primary school identified a subordinated role for students (McLoughlin, 2004). Frustration was evident on the part of students due to the slow pace of change, poor communication with the student body and the student's perception of adult control in reference to teachers' veto on discussion and decisions, and their imposition of sanctions (*ibid.*). While student voice is presented through the student council construct as a rights-based and citizenship project, the spectre of tokenism emerges:

The reality of children's present subordinate and 'incomplete' citizenship presents Irish educators with an immediate challenge. Token student councils should not be tolerated whereby they perpetuate this subordination (ibid., p. 141).

Research involving fourteen student councils in post-primary schools in Ireland found differing perceptions of the council by school management and students (Keogh and Whyte, 2005). Boards of management viewed the council as a consultative group, as a provider of information, as a communication channel and as a resource. Teachers in the same study, perceived the student council as a forum for students' concerns, peer support particularly in the area of social isolation and potential bullying, and as having a role in improving the school atmosphere. All the adults in the study identified the educational opportunity provided by the council to facilitate students to learn about teamwork, democratic processes, negotiation skills, and to identify issues and strategies for sustainable change in the school (*ibid.*).

Students' views, in contrast, saw the expected role and purpose of the council as one of action: listening to students; representing students' views; contributing to policy; providing feedback to the student body, and changing things like 'school uniform, changing food in the canteen, fixing things, dealing with issues, solving problems, helping students and organizing events' (*ibid.*, p. 55). However students' views on the effectiveness of the council were largely negative, citing apathy among the student cohort relating to difficulties in communication, representation and feedback. Elitism were also identified as, citing one student, 'only people who stand out and who work would get a position on the student council...people seen as messers wouldn't have a chance' (*ibid.*, p. 83). Its reflection of prefigurative democracy is also questioned as, in the view of another student 'the student council is all for show, so that they can say it's like a democracy, but it's not...because at the end of the day, only the staff have a say' (*ibid.*, p. 83), a finding that echoes those of (Arnot, McIntyre, Pedder and Reay, 2004; Fielding, 2001).

Responses to a national audit of student councils conducted by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) in 2011 indicated quite negative views from students. Just 208 councils from a total of over 720 post-primary schools responded. The 29% response rate, in itself, was indicative of a weak visibility for student councils in Irish post-primary schools. Of those that did respond to the audit, the majority of responses pointed towards tokenistic and very limited involvements for the student council in decision-making with just 50% of councils feeling that their views were taken seriously by school management (OMCYA, 2011). While the majority of councils felt that they were consulted on issues relating to school rules and policy formation, a majority of council members also identified their limited impact on decisions making.

Case-study research on three student councils in post-primary schools, tracing council activities and involvements over one school year identified to a conflict between rhetoric and practice in students' view of role (Fleming, 2013). The students demonstrated that they had embraced the language of representation, of a student forum, of advocacy, action

and support for students, however their of rhetoric and reality varied considerably from that of the student council liaison teachers and the school principals. It was evident that each student council could provide a construct for meaningful participation, prefigurative democracy and an experience of active citizenship for the students. However, the reality of the students' experiences reflected tokenistic activity, contrived involvements with decision-making, and a significant focus on school event organisation or charity fundraising. The study concluded that the opportunity for a deep, person-centred student voice reflecting rights, participative democracy and active citizenship was not being realised through the current student council construct in these schools (ibid).

Thus, though the rhetoric of the role for the council in schools points towards visibility and potential for engagement and participation in democratic practice and for dialogic consultation in school decision making, the lived experience appears to be largely negative and somewhat tokenistic (Fleming, 2013). A statement by the Democracy Commission (2005), [whose attention was focused on the capacity for democracy across the island of Ireland 'to be inclusive, participatory and egalitarian' (ibid., p. xi) in the context of the Good Friday Peace Agreement between the parties in Northern Ireland] seems prescient as it concluded that:

Student councils give students a voice but not a say (Democracy Commission, 2005, p. 33)

Student Voice: The motivation of evaluation

External evaluation. It was the introduction of external evaluation and school self-evaluation during the period between 2002 and 2012 that extended the policy discourse on student voice in Ireland following the establishment of student councils and the publication of the student council guidelines. The establishment of Whole-School Evaluation (WSE) in 2004 had created a focus on the student council as a representative structure for students in a post-primary school as inspectors outlined their intention to interview the student council during evaluations to represent the views of students (DES, 2004). A refinement of WSE as Whole-School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) included standardised questionnaires for students and their parents as part of school inspection (DES, 2011a). This development provided a further channel for student voice in external evaluation. The questionnaires however contained closed questions and did not give the students provision for comment on issues or on their experiences in their school. Inspectors also interviewed a representative focus group of students that included members of the student council in WSE-MLL evaluation process (ibid.).

The combination of focus-group interviews and questionnaires visibly widened the voice of students in external evaluation. It is questionable however, whether this voice gave students the agency or power to effect changes in their experience of school. Due to the nature of these exchanges with inspectors and their context within external evaluation it could be argued that the voice of the students was largely subjugated to that of a data-source in the evaluation process (Fleming, 2013).

Similarly, while the WSE process provided for direct post-evaluation oral feedback and dialogue on the findings of the evaluation to the board of management, teachers, and to the principal and deputy principal, this facility for feedback was not afforded to students (DES, 2004, 2011a) beyond the provision of a draft copy of the evaluation report to the student council, through its chairperson. While it is open to school management to use comment from students to inform a school response to an inspection report in advance of its publication, guidance and procedures as to how comment from or feedback to students

might transact in schools were not outlined or discussed in evaluation guidelines (DES, 2004, 2011a).

School self-evaluation. The concept of school self-evaluation as a further evaluative instrument that emerged on to the education landscape during this period has the potential to increase the volume of student voice within post-primary schools. The initial development of school self-evaluation began with the publication of criteria for school self-evaluation (DES, 2003). The document, 'Looking at our School' also made reference to the student council within a very agentive subsection referring to 'involvement of students in the operation of the school' (ibid., p. 40). However, the language of the descriptor, from which the school would self-evaluate, reflects the language of the Education Act (1998) and the student council guidelines (DES, 2002) by focusing the school on the evaluation of 'the extent to which the school's student council, in cooperation with management, parents and teachers, promotes the interests of the school and the involvement of students in the affairs of the school' (ibid.). This descriptor, as with the text of the act, reduced 'involvement' in the 'operation' of the school to one of 'promotion' of the school and involvement 'in the affairs of the school'.

School self-evaluation was also included in the education pillar of the aforementioned 'Towards 2016': the National Economic and Social Partnership agreement (2006). The agreement stated that 'the parties have agreed that each school will utilize the Department of Education and Science publication(s) "Looking at our School – an aid to self-evaluation in second level schools (2003)" to conduct a self-evaluation of school performance' (Towards 2016, 2006, 31.3, p. 126)

At government policy level, reference in the programme for government presented in 2011, raised the profile of school self-evaluation. A specific reference to school performance in the context of a national literacy and numeracy initiative in 2011, also further raised the stakes for performativity as 'a new system of self-evaluation will be introduced, requiring all schools to evaluate their performance year by year and publish information across a wide range of criteria' (DES, 2011b).

It was the publication of school self-evaluation guidelines (Inspectorate, 2012) however, that significantly advanced the student voice agenda in both primary and post-primary schools. The term student voice was particularly mentioned in the document in the context of a role for students in the process viewed as 'the inclusion of the voice of students and parents in school self-evaluation processes' (ibid., p. 9). Significantly, however, these guidelines located student voice for the first time in the context of classroom practice where it was placed as an evaluation criterion for teachers underscoring the pedagogical importance of engagement and consultation. Teachers were encouraged to evaluate student voice in their classrooms based on descriptors reflecting these dual elements:

Students' contributions and questions are encouraged and welcomed in the classroom

Due account is taken of students' views and opinions in accordance with their age and maturity (ibid., p. 42).

The guidelines do not make any reference to a role for the student council in school self-evaluation but focus on a wider concept of student voice as 'eliciting the views of students' (ibid., p.50). It is clear that these references to student voice viewed it as largely instrumental in the context of low-level participation in the provision of data. The guidelines fail to develop any sense of deep dialogic consultation with students or the methods to structure these engagements though they do make reference to the use of questionnaires, interviews and reflections (Fleming, 2013). Nevertheless, an emphasis is

placed on accountability reflected in the requirement on schools to produce a school self-evaluation report and a school improvement plan (Inspectorate, 2012).

School self-evaluation, as introduced in 2012, arguably represents the most significant and visible advance for the voice of students in pedagogy and in consultation in school decision-making in Ireland to date (Fleming, 2013). Encouraging 'students' contributions and questions' and 'students' views and opinions' within an official educational policy document is a significant advance from 'involvement of students in the affairs of the school' (Education Act, 1998, 27:3). Despite this, two significant risks emerge from these developments. In moving away from the student council as a representative student voice, arguably, an instrumentalist voice is being encouraged and directed primarily towards the gathering of data to inform and measure school performance and school improvement. Consequently, there is a risk that the opportunity to develop and embed deep student voice, as meaningful consultation, co-construction and the creation of rights-based, dialogic, person-centred democratic and inclusive schools, will be diminished or even lost. Equally, the growing association between student voice, school improvement and performativity, through various forms of evaluation presents a further risk as these imperatives could lose any interactive potential for change at school and classrooms level based on right, trust, relationship and learning. The opportunity to advance student voice as a human dialogic interaction within an inclusive classroom and school culture could be intercepted by a drive towards measurable improvements in standards (Fleming, 2013).

Conclusions

As a concept, student voice is complex and contested in its positioning within policy and practice as reflected in Irish schools. As an emerging discourse in Irish education, its definition, motivation and translation into practice still requires discussion, debate and clarification at both policy and school level. Student voice has emerged on to the Irish education landscape from a rights-based perspective arising from the UNCRC. It was developed through the policy discourse within a student council construct that was motivated by a combination of the vindication of the rights of the child to have voice in consultative decision making in schools, the emergence of a recognition of the child and young person as active and agentic in their learning, engagement and participation in schools, and the need to develop and sustain education for democratic citizenship. Notwithstanding citizenship curricular initiatives, it was the student council construct that became the main vehicle for student voice within each of these motivations. While the policy discourse defines and bounds the operation of the student council in schools, it is clear that the construct has been circumscribed by the power and authority discourses of school management. It is similarly circumscribed by the perceived pressure of curriculum delivery, by internal and external assessments of students, and by school evaluation, arguably within a performance-orientated and outcomes-driven script that reflects a neo-liberal and consumerist agenda for schools and education. In this context, the student council, as a construct for student voice within a right-based, consultative and democratic citizenship perspective, is largely tokenistic and functionally redundant.

Student voice has also emerged from the policy discourse initially within external evaluation of schools and latterly through the school self-evaluation policy discourse.

While this discourse reflects the language of a rights-based perspective for student voice it also includes reference to school performance and has the potential to further subvert any pedagogical and wider rights-based and democratic-citizenship motivations and potential for student voice.

Although school self-evaluation arguably represents the most significant and visible advance for student voice in schools in Ireland to date, its motivation and focus, as an

externally-mandated policy initiative is clearly on school improvement and performativity. This policy initiative lacks any significant motivation towards student voice as a person-centred dialogic interaction within an inclusive classroom and school culture. The opportunities, challenges and contestation of student voice within policy and practice in Irish Education therefore continue.



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