



Student voice and classroom practice: how students are consulted in contexts without traditions of student voice

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ABSTRACT

Different countries have different histories, traditions, cultures, and practices of student voice and are currently at different stages of their student voice journeys. This paper investigates how student voice is coming to be used in relation to classroom practice in different school types and socio-economic settings in the Irish education system. Ireland is a country without a strong tradition or history of student voice and particularly in relation to teaching and learning matters and it is envisaged that this paper will be of strong interest to those in countries where student voice is not yet prominent, but there are also wider implications. This research shows that students are now being consulted in relation to classroom practice in a variety of ways but that even within single school systems consultations are very much connected to school context with voice being used to different extents in different schools in different settings.

KEYWORDS

Student voice, consultation, teaching and learning, Ireland, context

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Introduction

Student voice has become a popular research area and much of the literature reports student voice being used at the classroom level in positive and well received ways (Fielding and Bragg 2003; McIntyre, Pedder, and Rudduck 2005; Flutter 2007; Graham et al. 2018). In particular, many researchers have reported teachers being surprised and impressed by students' insightful and meaningful contributions (Bragg 2007; Demetriou and Wilson 2010; Ferguson, Hanreddy, and Draxton 2011; Messiou and Ainscow 2020). It should be noted, however, that this positivity often emanates from research projects involving university-based researchers acting as facilitators of student voice, and not school staff consulting students as part of their routine work. While student voice can be positively embraced, it can also be threatening for teachers (McIntyre, Pedder, and Rudduck 2005; Ferguson, Hanreddy, and Draxton 2011; Nelson 2018). As Black and Mayes (2020, 1074) report, some teachers can find 'student voice practices emotionally challenging'. Student voice can also be experienced very differently, depending on how it is used and who is using it. Fielding (2001) previously warned that the dangers are that student voice initiatives serve adults, and recent evidence suggests that in accountability-driven education systems student voice can be used to monitor teachers (Skerritt 2020). To borrow the words of Charteris and Smardon, students can be positioned as consumers, 'judging the quality of instruction' (2019a, 104), 'with their teachers and leaders held accountable for classroom practice' (2019b, 7). Thus, when student voice is used by those with power such as inspectors or school leaders it can heighten anxieties, fears and concerns. However, context is likely to be

a key factor in how student voice is enacted and experienced, both in different education systems and in different schools within the same system.

This paper investigates how student voice is coming to be used in relation to classroom practice in the different school types in the Irish education system, including in different socio-economic settings. Ireland is a country without a strong tradition or history of student voice (Lodge and Lynch 2000; Shevlin and Rose 2008; Jeffers 2011) and particularly in relation to teaching and learning matters and in this regard this research is the first of its kind. It specifically explores, for the first time, how student voice, explicitly concerning classroom practice, is likely to be enacted differently in different schools, taking account of both school patronage and school socio-economic context. No other piece of research in Ireland exists in this area and until now this has remained an unexplored aspect of Irish education. Significantly, this research draws on the views of those involved in daily school life – school staff from classroom teachers to school leaders, and of course, students – and includes the three models of post-primary school in Ireland, and for each model includes schools in both disadvantaged and more privileged settings. Thus, this paper provides unprecedented knowledge and insights, and it is envisaged that it will encourage and instigate further research not only in Ireland but also in other countries and especially those without strong traditions of student voice. Such research may be of interest to those involved in teaching and learning and leadership and governance in schools, research in higher education, and policy and advocacy in the public and voluntary sectors.

Organisation of the Irish school system

Particular care is taken throughout this paper when referring to the different types of schools in Ireland as the terminology is not quite in line with international practice (Drudy and Lynch 1993). Like Sugrue (2002), we use the term ‘post-primary’ here as the collective term for all second-level schools in Ireland because in Ireland ‘secondary schools’ are a particular school type i.e., voluntary secondary schools. From an international vantage point, Grant (2000, 312) explains how the terminology used in Ireland does not necessarily have the same meaning in other countries:

the term ‘secondary school’ may mean the entire stage from pre-adolescence onwards (as in the systems of the British Isles or the USA), or it may be only the stage entered after compulsory school, as in Scandinavia. But this does not apply everywhere. In some countries, only certain post-compulsory schools—generally those leading to higher education—are designated as ‘secondary’, thus distinguishing them from vocational or trade schools. The Irish Republic offers an example of what used to be a common Western European practice. Further, structural changes may take place but old titles may remain in use.¹

To use the term ‘secondary’ school when referring to other types of schools in the Irish context, such as community schools, would be incorrect and misleading. Therefore, when secondary schools are mentioned, it is a specific type of school (i.e., voluntary secondary schools) and not all types of post-primary schools.

The Irish school system is rather complex. At post-primary level, Coolahan et al. (2017) describe it as being divided into a hierarchy of different strata: voluntary secondary schools, then community and comprehensive schools, and then the schools in the Education and Training Board (ETB) sector. The schools in the ETB sector were previously known as vocational schools and are now referred to as ETB schools, or in some cases community colleges. Although state aided, the voluntary secondary schools are privately owned and managed, typically by the Catholic Church, while community schools and comprehensive schools are state schools, but the former operate under the joint trusteeship of religious denominations and ETBs and the latter operate under the sole trusteeship of religious denominations (Skerritt and Salokangas 2020), with the Catholic Church usually the denomination in both cases. While some schools in the ETB sector do have religious co-trustees (Liddy, O’Flaherty, and McCormack 2019), schools in this sector are publicly managed and are therefore ‘a distinctive segment of the Irish schooling system’ (O’Flaherty et al.

2018, 318). Essentially, the different types of schools can be clustered into three traditions: voluntary secondary schools, ETB schools/community colleges, and community/comprehensive schools (Coolahan 1995). All of these school types can also have what is known as ‘DEIS’ (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) status i.e., DEIS schools are recognised as serving students from deprived areas and receive extra funding, resources, and staffing allocations.

Student voice and classroom practice

The literature puts forward many benefits of student voice. As Keddie (2015) explains, there is the ‘the idea of schools as democratic communities where students, teachers and other school staff collaborate with each other to improve the quality of schooling’. Student voice advocates, Mayes (2020, 380) acknowledges,

argue that student voice practices foster dialogue between students and teachers (Cook-Sather, 2002) and lived experiences of active citizenship (Holdsworth, 2000). Such initiatives have been associated with feelings of ‘trust’ (Cook-Sather 2002) and ‘respect’ (Baroutsis, McGregor, and Mills 2016, 132).

Student voice in the classroom is significant because students and teachers experience the classroom differently (Parr and Hawe 2020). Thus, it is argued that student voice enhances learning conditions through students’ increased engagement and teachers’ new perspectives (Keddie 2015). Charteris and Thomas (2017, 167), for example, propose that ‘a student voice approach can provide further information in the form of a learner lens for teachers to reflect on and take pedagogic action’, and Baroutsis, McGregor, and Mills (2016) suggest that teachers can both ‘find out’ and be surprised by students’ capabilities. As noted in this paper’s opening, however, many of the studies reporting the positives of student voice in relation to classroom practice involve some form of support provided to schools by researchers, and teachers can find student voice threatening. Indeed, students often exhibit awareness of the impact their feedback can potentially have on teachers (Rudduck and Fielding 2006; Morgan 2009; Keddie 2015; Graham et al. 2018; Messiou and Ainscow 2020).

In Ireland, as elsewhere, the concept of student voice has become much stronger in official discourse in recent years. There has been an increase in research reporting that there is a desire among students in Irish post-primary schools for discussions, opinion sharing, and more of a say in their lessons (Smyth, Banks, and Calvert 2011; Smyth and Banks 2012; Harrison, McNamara, and O’Hara 2020) but in practice it appears that the traditional pedagogy of teaching in Ireland consisting of more teacher-centred approaches with little input from students continues to prevail to a large degree. As the following comments from teachers in Fleming’s (2013, 164–165) doctoral research show, consulting students on classroom practice can be daunting for teachers in Irish post-primary schools, as well as being unique for all involved parties:

When you hand them a questionnaire you are a bit apprehensive as to what they are actually going to put down.

I suppose it was the first time I ever would have (consulted), I don’t think the students knew it but in essence they were judging my classes without really knowing that, and I didn’t put it across that way.

The idea of choosing how to learn in the class was daunting as they see the teacher with that power. They thought I was carrying out an April fools joke last Friday.

I was apprehensive that they would see this as some sort of joke and that they wouldn’t take it seriously because a teacher asking them their opinions wouldn’t happen very much. And I was also a bit apprehensive that they would see this as a weakness in me, asking them something about my teaching that they might see it that there was something wrong with it.

While the nine teachers involved in Fleming’s (2013) doctoral research did ultimately have positive experiences of student voice once actually experienced, only two of these teachers indicated that they

continued with and remained committed to student voice in their classrooms in the school year following the research period. Indicative of how student voice is perceived by many teachers in Irish post-primary schools is the response from one mathematics teacher in Fleming's (2013, 187) research when asked if he had discussed student voice and his thoughts on the students' comments with other teachers in his department:

I'd say now their backs would go up straight away. I'd say they would be like 'who the hell, who does he think he is' ... I think that maybe that would be too far for most people to take ... I am comfortable enough to discuss that idea with certain staff members but I'm not sure now that I'd throw that out in a general staff meeting because ... I don't think people would see that positively necessarily and would see it as a teacher siding with students rather than staff. So I'd leave that one go.

The literature continues to indicate that student voice is not commonly used in Irish classrooms (Forde et al. 2018; Mooney Simmie, Moles, and O'Grady 2019; Harrison, McNamara, and O'Hara 2020). Even in ETB schools, which might be thought of as being somewhat more open and receptive to student voice, the situation does not appear to be too dissimilar. Recent research exploring the views of second-year students towards their participation in school life in ETBs by McCormack, O'Flaherty, and Liddy (2021, 429) found that, while during quantitative data collection students tended to agree that they were encouraged to be actively involved in lessons, the qualitative data presented a discrepancy:

focus group participants indicated that this depended on the teacher, with some adopting student-centred approaches while others were more didactic in their teaching styles. While students in School 18 indicated that 'there is always an activity or something in class', the common message across focus groups was that during lessons, students usually listened, read or took notes. While some teachers may draw on active learning methodologies, students usually 'sit down and listen to what the teachers are saying' (FG, School 1), 'watch teachers doing stuff on the board' (FG, School 18) or 'you listen to the teachers reading from the book and take notes' (FG, School 13). According to students in School 14b, 'it's always the textbook'. The main activity students engaged in was 'listening in class ... if you don't listen you won't *absorb the information*' (FG, School 16, emphasis added). Students views are supported by the findings of the TALIS study (2009), which highlighted the reliance of Irish teachers, in comparison to their OECD counterparts, on direct transmission approaches.

In other jurisdictions such as New Zealand we see how student voice can be gathered by school leaders for the purpose of evaluation and how students can become information providers (Charteris and Smardon 2019c) and there are indications in the recent research literature that student voice presents potential opportunities for school principals in Ireland to gain insights into teachers' classroom practice. Comments from participants in Harvey's (2015) doctoral research show how some school leaders are now taking the position that students' views should be sought on teaching and learning, and that this position is justified through the use of neoliberal language. More recently, Young et al. (2018) found that some principals were managing discussions with students about their grades, and a teacher in a study by Salokangas, Wermke, and Harvey (2020) demonstrated awareness of the range of informal tools and techniques principals can use to monitor teachers, explaining that even if principals do not technically enter classrooms during lessons, they can use other methods to form a judgement such as asking students.

Method

This paper draws on interview data gathered from 55 school staff and 46 students in seven Irish post-primary schools. Five of the schools were visited as part of an Erasmus+ funded project entitled 'Distributed Evaluation and Planning in Schools' (for more information about this project see Brown et al. 2020a, 2020b, 2021). Data gathered from these five schools have been reported elsewhere, highlighting how student voice in Ireland continues to focus on non-academic matters (see Brown et al. 2020b). A secondary analysis was conducted, however, to examine the ways in which students are consulted on classroom practice in these

schools and is combined here with subsequent data gathered from two additional schools to ensure that all school traditions, including schools both with and without DEIS (disadvantaged) status, were included in this study.² The seven schools, contextual information about each school, and the 101 interviewees are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Table 1.

School	Participants interviewed	Primary or secondary analysis
<p>Voluntary secondary school (non-DEIS)</p> <p>This is a single-sex (male) voluntary secondary school of a Catholic ethos. Its 700 students come from a variety of backgrounds – some come from middle-class backgrounds with well-educated parents in high-status employment, and others come from working-class backgrounds. This school is considered to be a high-performing school in terms of students' academic attainment, and it also has a reputation for sporting excellence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Deputy principal • Post-holder with responsibility for SSE • Two post-holders with responsibility for year groups • Three classroom teachers • Eight students 	Secondary
<p>Voluntary secondary school (DEIS A)</p> <p>This school is a single-sex (male) voluntary secondary school of a Catholic ethos. The school is classified as a disadvantaged school as it serves students from low-income families. More than 500 students are currently enrolled. The school often faces problems in terms of students' behaviour and parents' engagement, and a major problem is students' attendance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Post-holder with responsibility for SSE • Post-holder with responsibility for year group • Home School Community Liaison • Post-holder with responsibility for student council • Three classroom teachers • Eight students 	Secondary

School	Participants interviewed	Primary or secondary analysis
<p>Voluntary secondary school (DEIS B)</p> <p>This school is a single-sex (female) voluntary secondary school of a Catholic ethos. The school serves an impoverished area and has DEIS status. Less than 200 students attend this school and notably, many do later attend university.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Deputy principal • Home School Community Liaison • Post-holder with responsibility for student council • Four classroom teachers • Eight students 	Secondary
<p>Community school (non-DEIS)</p> <p>This is a co-educational community school serving more than 1,000 students. The students attending this school come from a wide range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds and the school caters for a very diverse range of students and academic abilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Post-holder with responsibility for student council • Post-holder with responsibility for year group • Three classroom teachers • Five students 	Secondary

School	Participants interviewed	Primary or secondary analysis
<p>Community school (DEIS) This is a co-educational community school serving a region of socio-economic disadvantage. The school has disadvantaged status and a key issue in the school is students' behaviour. Approximately 500 students attend this school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Deputy principal • Post-holder with responsibility for special educational needs • Post-holder with responsibility for school action plan • Post-holder with responsibility for student welfare • Three classroom teachers • Six students 	Primary
<p>ETB school (non-DEIS) This school is a co-educational ETB school in an affluent area. Over 1,000 students attend this school. The majority of students are coming from privileged backgrounds but students from disadvantaged backgrounds also attend the school, and a small proportion of students are technically homeless. The school is a high-performing one.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Three deputy principals • Post-holder with responsibility for year group • Four classroom teachers • Eight Students 	Secondary

School	Participants interviewed	Primary or secondary analysis
<p>ETB school (DEIS)</p> <p>This school is a single-sex (female) ETB school attended by less than 200 students. The school has disadvantaged status and faces many socio-economic challenges with attendance in particular being a key issue.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Deputy principal • Post-holder with responsibility for teaching and learning • Post-holder with responsibility for wellbeing • Post-holder with responsibility for special educational needs and student voice • Three classroom teachers • Three students 	Primary

A heuristic device for researching student voice in relation to classroom practice in Irish post-primary schools has been presented elsewhere (see Skerritt, O'Hara, and Brown 2021). This introduced the concepts of classroom-level consultations which take place between teachers and students, and management-level consultations which take place between school leaders and students without the involvement of teachers. Moreover, it raised contextual questions for researchers to consider and explore in future studies on the use of student voice in relation to classroom practice in Irish post-primary schools such as:

- Are classroom-level consultations infrequent?
- Are management-level consultations becoming more common?
- Are students consulted less in schools with a traditional majority-led (religious) school culture?
- Are students consulted more in schools with disadvantaged status? (Skerritt, O'Hara, and Brown 2021)

Thus, this research set out to answer three key questions:

1. In what ways are students consulted on classroom practice in Irish post-primary schools?
2. Are students consulted differently in different types of schools?
3. Are students consulted differently in different socio-economic contexts?

Findings

Classroom-level consultations: consulting students in lessons

The clearest form of consultation reported involved students providing their views on teaching and learning in their lessons, and there was a strong view among the school staff discussing this that it reflected a positive cultural change in classrooms in Irish schools in recent years. However, classroom-level consultations were not common practice in most schools. In voluntary secondary schools, regardless of socio-economic context, teachers exhibited little knowledge or awareness of students being consulted in classrooms. When asked if student voice would be used in classrooms most teachers in these schools were hesitant and unconfident. As one teacher said,

Eh, no. Not on stuff that would happen inside the classroom. (Classroom teacher 1, voluntary secondary school, DEIS A)

In voluntary secondary schools and community schools, but especially in the case of the former, only rarely did teachers mention or give examples of affording students voice and increased responsibility at the classroom level. Some of the few instances of classroom-level consultations related to teachers seeking feedback on their teaching from students, students choosing the classroom layout, and students choosing the texts to be studied. As noted, however, the community schools were more active in this area than voluntary secondary schools:

So, one of the things I would actually do at the end of every year term is, I would have a feedback sheet and so I'm giving the students voice at the end of every term. What am I doing well, what do I need to work etc.? I think that's hugely important. I've actually carried it over from my teaching practice days. (Classroom teacher 1, voluntary secondary school, non-DEIS)

My students decided what way we would lay out the room and what way they felt was conducive to effective learning. (Classroom teacher 1, community school, non-DEIS)

In English, I let them pick the texts sometimes that they study ... we might have a vote on it but I don't know if that happens across the board. Some years I actually don't do that with, it depends on the class and it depends on the texts as well. (Post-holder with responsibility for student welfare, community school, DEIS)

The common view of both staff and students in voluntary secondary schools and community schools was that classroom-level consultations were used at the discretion of some teachers:

A couple of teachers have done it. It's not across the board in the school. I actually threw out there 'Right lads, what did you find interesting? What did you not like?' and I've actually tailored my programme this year to suit that. (Classroom teacher 2, voluntary secondary school, non-DEIS)

I think a lot of teachers like to think it's their classroom and they are the person in that classroom, and they are in charge. I would be open. I like to hear what they say. (Post-holder with responsibility for year group, voluntary secondary school, DEIS A)

One of the teachers. One of the teachers actually cares how we would like to learn but the majority of them teach how they want to teach even if we say that we would prefer if it is taught this way ... This year we got so many new teachers and we were like "We would like to learn this way because we're used to it" and they were like "Yeah, but that's not my way so you're just going to have to put up with it". (Student 2, community school, DEIS)

Moreover, it was felt in these schools that classroom-level consultations were used by some teachers only occasionally as opposed to regularly:

I think it's always a more term by term basis when it happens because it's the teacher trying to improve themselves rather than the school trying to improve the teaching. (Student 1, community school, non-DEIS)

Classroom-level consultations were reported to be uncommon and infrequent in voluntary secondary schools and community schools, with very few examples given. The staff in the community school with DEIS status, however, did appear to be more open to student voice in the classroom and it was in this school, relative to the other voluntary secondary schools and the community school in more privileged circumstances, that school management expressed a strong interest in improving the current consultation levels. For example, the deputy principal spoke of management's interest in gradually changing the culture of teaching and learning in the school:

In terms of in the classroom then, in terms of how the lessons are taught or the particular style, that's something again we want to work on because myself and the principal are a bit anxious about moving ... With new teachers coming in, they might bring in some methodologies that haven't been used in this school before, and with the principal coming from her previous school, she wanted to bring these methodologies in but bring them in at a slow, easy pace to get people used to it and to get the students involved as well. (Deputy principal, community school, DEIS)

In interviews with classroom teachers and post-holders in this school, three members of staff mentioned how their experiences of teaching in other jurisdictions have normalised student voice for them. In this instance, a classroom teacher with three years of experience refers to her pre-service studies:

I've done feedback forms. I trained in Scotland, my teacher training, so it was kind of put in to make sure we do that so we can adjust or adapt. (Classroom teacher 1, community school, DEIS)

Relative to the other schools, student voice discourses were undoubtedly stronger in the ETB schools. Senior leaders in the ETB school in an affluent area emphasised that student voice actively took place in classrooms with teachers consulting students on teaching and learning matters:

In a lot of classes they will do summary work with their teachers. What works for them, what doesn't work for them and all that. (Deputy principal 3, ETB school, non-DEIS)

Teachers check in with students and they ask them, especially if they've tried new things or new approaches in class they actually ask them and say 'What did you think of this?' 'Have you enjoyed it?' (Deputy principal 1, ETB school, non-DEIS)

However, despite these contentions, the four classroom teachers interviewed in this school did not quite share this view. When discussing student voice with classroom teachers there was little mention of student voice taking place at the level of the classroom or in relation to teaching and learning. Only in one instance did a classroom teacher mention student voice in academic terms. The following comment was made by a teacher who has 18 years of experience and who is a mentor to newly qualified teachers in the school:

I suppose in the classroom, in terms of teaching and learning I would say students are very much involved in evaluating with their own learning. I would say they're very much involved and encouraged to be involved in their own learning ... There's this whole thing now of reflective practice both for students and for teachers where they're looking for you to reflect, reflect, reflect on everything that you do and think of how you can improve what you're doing. They're also looking at collaboration which is the new buzzword, or groupwork, presentations, a lot more of that type of thing so I think students are more involved in their learning and evaluating their learning than they ever were in the past. (Classroom teacher 4, ETB school, non-DEIS)

Similar to most classroom teachers in this ETB school, the one post-holder interviewed in this school also gave the impression that student voice was rather peripheral to him. When asked if students are consulted on teaching and learning matters in the school, this participant made an attempt at suggesting students were consulted during lessons:

Not that I'm aware of. Maybe in an inspection ... Maybe it's done informally, assessment for learning. (Post-holder with responsibility for year group, ETB school, non-DEIS)

It was only in the ETB school with DEIS status that classroom-level consultations appeared to be common. The post-holder with responsibility for both special educational needs (SEN) and student voice explained that most teachers were supportive of student voice in the classroom:

It varies, it definitely varies. I'd like to think, and maybe that's pessimistic almost, I'd like to think there's maybe a 60-40 split in terms of 60-40 in favour of the students having a certain amount of autonomy in the classes. I would hope. (Post-holder with responsibility for SEN and student voice, ETB school, DEIS)

Staff members in this school spoke confidently about student voice being used in lessons throughout the school, but in doing so acknowledged that there was still room for improvement in some classrooms. For example:

I personally am very conscious of it. I try to include them all the time. I was doing it today in every class. I think we're good but that doesn't mean there isn't room for improvement ... Students would often say 'We'd like to do something different'. Teachers try to accommodate if at all possible but I would say there's room for improvement in that area. (Post-holder with responsibility for wellbeing, ETB school, DEIS)

Indicative of the value placed on student voice in this school and the intent to continue building upon the current culture is how the post-holder responsible for SEN and student voice raised the 'need to address student voice as part of our classroom schemes', while the post-holder with responsibility for teaching and learning similarly spoke of encouraging teachers to engage with feedback provided by students:

Personally as student voice coordinator I'd like to see it more explicitly done ... We are going to undertake that but I hope it happens sooner rather than later because I think this is a huge area that we need to address. (Post-holder with responsibility for SEN and student voice, ETB school, DEIS)

I think some teachers will still just teach the way they like to teach, which may not necessarily work for the class and that's why in my post I'm asking and encouraging teachers to use different strategies because I know from the student voice that's what they're looking for but it's still not happening in every classroom. (Post-holder with responsibility for teaching and learning, ETB school, DEIS)

While classroom-level consultations were not common in voluntary secondary schools or community schools, there was a strong discourse of consultation in the ETB schools. However, while this appeared to be genuine in the ETB school with DEIS status, it did not appear to be the case in the ETB school in a more privileged setting. Of note, was the community school with DEIS status which was hoping to develop a culture of student voice in the school and striving to be more proactive with classroom-level consultations.

Management-level consultations: questionnaires issued to students

Students were being consulted in all three voluntary secondary schools via questionnaires, regardless of socio-economic context. Here, designated staff members would gather data on students' views on teaching and learning across the school:

Ms Kelly conducted a survey on differentiation in the classroom because we're trying to differentiate teaching and learning here so I would have been involved because I'm the IT (Information Technology) teacher, conducting the surveys in the computer room on teaching styles they liked. (Classroom teacher 4, voluntary secondary school, DEIS B)

The last survey we had was on literacy, numeracy, active learning. We have a big drive on active learning. (Post-holder with responsibility for SSE, voluntary secondary school, DEIS A)

Some second years were taken out and we did a survey online in the computer room and they asked us loads of questions, about 30 questions, about the school. Like how often would teachers do this and different things like that. (Student 1, voluntary secondary school, non-DEIS)

Outside of the voluntary secondary schools, questionnaires appeared to be marginally used in both ETB schools and community schools, with very little mention of them taking place. There was no mention of questionnaires being used in the community school without DEIS status, and only one mention of questionnaires being used in both the ETB school with DEIS status and in the ETB school in more privileged circumstances. In the case of the latter, a previous questionnaire was mentioned, but only by one participant, and it was noted that the questionnaire was part of an additional initiative:

We recently surveyed students on aspects of their learning with regards to oral language development for a different project that we're doing. (Deputy principal 1, ETB school, non-DEIS)

Another deputy principal in this school did mention, however, that questionnaires were in the pipeline, but overall this form of management-level consultation only appeared to be common in voluntary secondary schools, regardless of socio-economic context. In the community school with DEIS status, however, surveys were also reported as being used. Various staff members and students mentioned surveys, with the latter lamenting their ineffectiveness. For example, to an ensemble of laughter during a focus group interview one student said:

They made a big effort to find out what learner you are, how you excel ... They didn't do anything with that. Got the numbers and said "Oh, look at this fancy graph" (Student 5, community school, DEIS)

This form of management-level consultation only appeared to be common in voluntary secondary schools, regardless of socio-economic context. In ETB schools and community schools, the use of questionnaires might be considered marginal, with one of the community schools, a community school with DEIS status, occupying the middle ground.

Management-level consultations: interviewing students

Some schools conducted interviews with students to explore how they felt about general school life, as well as matters relating to teaching and learning. In most cases, however, these tended to be concerned with general matters. Nonetheless, two schools did use focus groups to discuss teaching and learning. In a voluntary secondary school without DEIS status, a head of year who also had a role in assisting the post-holder with responsibility for SSE explained that the school had 'set up an SSE (school self-evaluation) team which meets regularly', as well as a student SSE team. The student SSE team was described as 'a general focus group or feedback group that will tell me about what's working well, what's not working well'(post-holder with responsibility for year group 1, voluntary secondary school, non-DEIS). Similarly, in the ETB school without DEIS status focus groups were also used to discuss teaching and learning, although they were not common:

Last year we met a group of students and we asked them their experiences of CBAs (Classroom-Based Assessments) and how they found it. (Deputy principal 1, ETB school, non-DEIS)

However, the principal of this school did mention that each student in their final year of school is personally interviewed for feedback purposes:

Every student will have had a meeting with me before they graduate. In sixth year. Every single one. And they get an evaluation of the school. They actually fill out their own personal evaluation form and they meet me, and they also evaluate themselves, and the contribution they've made, and I do ask them if there was one thing

they'd change about the school. And I ask them about teaching and learning and I ask them about their engagement with it, and that's where we get our information. (Principal, ETB school, non-DEIS)

It is evident that interviews with students are not common, and particularly interviews in relation to classroom practice. Only two schools reported conducting interviews with students and these were both non-DEIS schools.

Management-level consultations: informal conversations with students

While interviews were not common in schools, informal conversations between management/post-holders and students were far more prevalent, and mainly in ETB schools and community schools:

Informally we would as well. Often, we chat to students to say 'How are you getting on?' How are you finding this year? What works well for you in a class? What do you enjoy in a lesson?'. Sometimes we cover lessons and that's a chance to ask them then again. (Deputy principal 1, ETB school, non-DEIS)

The informal conversations I think are happening all the time. I think the informal conversations are just, you're walking down the corridor or you, you're taking, you get into a class, kids might be standing outside and you're standing outside talking to kids ... getting them to articulate. (Deputy principal, community school, DEIS)

In contrast, there was only one mention of informal conversations taking place in the three voluntary secondary schools. While management and post-holders in ETB schools and community schools spoke of informal conversations as commonplace, notably, staff members in the ETB and community schools with DEIS status exhibited very strong awareness of these conversations. Some comments from classroom teachers included:

If they feel overwhelmed they'll say it to the year head as well and she'll try and get someone in to talk to them, or tell the teachers to maybe go a bit easier—or go harder! I use Ms Walsh as an example because they literally tell her EVERYTHING. They will, if they have an issue with anything, they'll tell her straight away because she's just that kind of woman. She'll check in with them on a regular basis. What kind of mood they're in mainly, and their mood is obviously affected by what's going on in classrooms. They would be very open with her. (Classroom teacher 2, ETB school, DEIS)

Senior year heads, I just know from being in the school, often teach them as a class as well so they have lots of group interaction with them and then they have individual interactions with them as well. (Classroom teacher 3, community school, DEIS)

Our pupils are very vocal. If they feel that something isn't right they will make it known. They are not holding back. They will go straight to their year head. (Classroom teacher 2, community school, DEIS)

In the ETB school with DEIS status the students also emphasised that informal conversations between students and management were common:

The students would go up to them. If you wanted to go on a trip or be taught a certain way or need permission for something. (Student 3, ETB school, DEIS)

While interviews were rare, informal conversations were very common in the ETB schools and community schools and the awareness the teachers in the schools with DEIS status had of these conversations was striking. In contrast, informal conversations did not appear to be common in the voluntary secondary schools.

Summary

While student voice in Irish post-primary schools continues to focus on non-academic issues, as has recently been found elsewhere (see Brown et al. 2020b), this research has shown that student voice is being used, to varying extents, in relation to classroom practice in Irish schools. The data presented here provide clear evidence that students in Irish post-primary schools are now being consulted on teaching and learning matters through what have been coined ‘classroom-level consultations’ and ‘management-level consultations’ (Skerritt, O’Hara, and Brown 2021). Classroom-level consultations involve teachers liaising with their students about classroom practice and the examples given during interviews include teachers seeking feedback on their teaching from students, students deciding on the classroom layout, and students choosing the texts to be studied. On the other hand, management-level consultations involve senior leaders gathering data from students on classroom practice, or having this data collected for them, with classroom teachers removed from the process. The main forms of management-level consultations reported were questionnaires issued to students and management having informal conversations with students, while to a lesser extent interviews were also taking place, either with individual students or through focus groups.

The qualitative data presented here suggest that classroom-level consultations are more common in ETB schools than in community schools and especially in voluntary secondary schools. In the case of voluntary secondary schools and community schools, there was very little evidence of classroom-level consultations taking place while the discourse of consultation was very strong in the ETB schools. In terms of the socio-economic context of schools, classroom-level consultations appeared to be so minimal in the voluntary secondary schools and community schools that it is not possible to decipher any difference between DEIS schools and non-DEIS schools in terms of their current practices. However, the community school with DEIS status stands out because, relative to the non-DEIS community school, school management expressed a strong interest in improving the current consultation levels and some staff members appeared to be already somewhat more engaged with student voice. It is when the ETB schools are considered that the greatest difference between DEIS schools and non-DEIS schools can be seen. While school leaders in the non-DEIS ETB school put a strong emphasis on classroom-level consultations being embedded in the culture of the school, the interviews with other staff members revealed that this was not actually the case. In the ETB school with DEIS status, however, classroom-level consultations were evident and there appeared to be a genuine culture of consultation, but one that still had room for improvement and that was being built upon. In this regard, both the community school and the ETB school serving disadvantaged areas appear to be more enthusiastic about and proactive in the area of classroom-level consultations.

In terms of management-level consultations, the interviewing of students does not appear to be a regular occurrence in Irish post-primary schools but others forms of consultation are common. In voluntary secondary schools, regardless of socio-economic context, students are often surveyed via questionnaires. In ETB schools and community schools, however, informal discussions between management and students are common, and particularly in schools with DEIS status staff had a very strong awareness of these conversations.

Discussion

Students in Irish schools are now, to varying extents, being consulted on teaching and learning matters and we are moving past a time where students’ views are overlooked and ignored. Consultations in relation to classroom practice, however, are very much dependent on context – as this research shows, student voice is being used to different extents in different schools in different settings. It is important, however, that an extensive body of contextually sensitive knowledge be accumulated to enhance understandings of student voice in relation to classroom practice both in Ireland and beyond. Along with the data presented here, our heuristic device for researching student voice in relation to classroom practice (Skerritt, O’Hara, and Brown 2021) can be a suitable starting point for future work.

Pearce and Wood (2019, 125) make the important point that ‘student voice initiatives are necessarily grounded and sensitive to the local context’. It is unlikely that the emergence of classroom-level consultations and management-level consultations in Ireland will be of major interest to researchers in countries where student voice is far more established, but it points to the role of context and how different education systems are at different points of their student voice journeys. The findings here can be of use to these researchers in that it is demonstrated that these consultations are taking place elsewhere and that student voice is becoming more active globally. This research will, however, resonate far more with scholars in countries that do not have a strong tradition or history of student voice, such as the post-Soviet nations (Khokhotva and Albizuri 2020), but even in countries where student voice is far more pronounced and embedded questions are raised about how voice might differ between different school types and schools in different socio-economic settings. One recent study on student participation in post-primary schools in New South Wales in Australia reported that variations between schools appeared to be more ‘dependent upon the approach of the principal and/or individual teachers’ than factors related to ethos/sector, demography or geography (Graham et al. 2018, 1034) but further research is needed. As well as exploring the enactments and experiences of the different staff members in schools, scholars in England, for example, might begin to look at how voice differs between academy schools (England’s equivalent of America’s charter schools, Australia’s independent schools, Sweden’s free schools, and Chile’s voucher schools) and the non-academy schools or what are sometimes referred to as ‘ordinary schools’ – or even between stand-alone academies and academies that are part of a chain of schools under the direction of a single board of directors. Within different education systems, it is advised that in addition to researching differences between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools, scholars should also begin to examine other characteristics too such as the possible differences between urban and rural schools, fee-paying and non-fee-paying schools, and single-sex and co-educational schools.

While the emergence of classroom-level consultations represents a positive development, management-level consultations should perhaps give rise to concern. There is currently an Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill before the Irish Parliament that would require schools to publish and operate charters for students and parents and while this is expected to further increase student voice in Irish schools, its overall aim of improving ‘the level of engagement between schools and students and their parents by inviting feedback, comment and observations’ could create cultures of surveillance in that it ‘reflects the Government’s commitment to introduce a stronger complaints procedure’ (www.education.ie). While student voice can be used to monitor teachers in accountability-driven systems (see Skerritt 2020), Ireland is contextually rather different to countries where this is currently more common, such as England (Page 2017), Sweden (Frostenson and Englund 2020), New Zealand (Charteris and Smardon 2019c), Australia (Sullivan et al. 2020), and America (Finefter-Rosenbluh 2020). Nonetheless, the management-level consultations in the data are particularly noteworthy not only because of the lack of tradition of student voice in Ireland but because of the Student and Parent Charter Bill, and because of the sensitivity of teachers towards evaluations more broadly. The reviewed criticisms of student evaluations of teachers in the literature highlight how student perception surveys are embedded in neoliberal discourses and correspond to various practices that can demoralise teachers (Perry-Hazan 2019) while at the same time, as innocent as the informal conversations may be, ‘it would be difficult for anyone not to be influenced by pupil reports of poor teaching’ (Page 2015, 1042) and these informal conversations could, even unintentionally, act as a form of surveillance. It is the contention of this paper, that of the classroom-level consultations and management-level consultations taking place in Irish schools, it is the former that should be prioritised and focused on, once it does not represent ‘a move away from a model of professional autonomy where teachers make their own decisions about teaching quality’ (Bragg 2007, 351) or a move to a construction of teachers as technicians (Mayes, Black, and Finneran 2021). In countries where student voice is still emerging and developing, it is likely that student voice focused on open and transparent dialogue between teachers and

students devoid of any outside pressure or surveillance would be most beneficial. As Charteris and Smardon (2019b) state, the emancipatory potential of voice is missed when students are positioned as consumers, data sources, and resources for quality control.

Conclusion

Based on schools in Ireland, a country without a strong history or tradition of student voice, this research has demonstrated how students are now, to varying extents, being consulted in relation to classroom practice but that within the school system the consultations are very much connected to school context. The qualitative data presented here point to how, in the words of Lynch and Lodge (2002, 45), ‘the history of a school is part of what it is in the present’ in that consultations remain underdeveloped in schools with traditional majority-led (religious) cultures such as the Catholic voluntary secondary schools. It appears that the less involvement of such a culture, the more students are consulted as can be seen in the case of the ETB schools and even to some extent in the schools operating under the joint trusteeship of religious personnel and ETBs such as the community schools. However, socio-economic context also plays an influential role, and as well as suggesting that consultations are more pronounced in schools without traditional majority-led (religious) cultures the data indicate that student voice is in some cases also more pronounced in schools with disadvantaged status. As well as having their own histories, schools deal with different local social ‘problems’ and intakes which will also impact their enactments (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012).

It is important to bear in mind that different countries have different histories, traditions, cultures, and practices of student voice and are currently at different stages of their student voice journeys. As shown here, some countries are only beginning this journey in terms of liaising with students on classroom practice, and within this, different schools are also at different points. Looking ahead, the progression of student voice in schools in countries such as Ireland can represent a positive development but for this to happen we first need to explore the ways that student voice is taking place, understand the experiences and perceptions of the those involved and affected, and identify and develop mechanisms for advancing and consolidating voice in schools in practical, non-threatening, and sustainable ways – all of which should involve accumulating a body of research that pays close attention to context.

Notes

1. In Ireland, the ‘minimum school leaving age is 16 or after 3 years of post-primary education, whichever is later’ (www.gov.ie). Free post-primary education was only introduced in 1967, however, and up until this time most children did not participate in full-time education after primary level. Ireland’s secondary schools are therefore no longer post-compulsory schools but they do continue a close association with entry into higher education.
2. A notable omission from this research are the multi-denominational schools known as Educate Together schools. Educate Together schools have been in operation at post-primary level since 2014 and it appears that student voice is more pronounced in these schools. Educate Together schools currently make up approximately 3% of the post-primary sector but it is expected that the number of these schools will rise in the coming years. Educate Together schools are classed as voluntary secondary schools, although some can also be joint patrons of or in partnership with other types of schools.

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