

Student Voice: opportunities and challenges in an Irish context

Gráinne Macken Junior Cycle for Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) have been partners in a three-year Erasmus Plus project, Student Voice – Bridge to Learning. The project, which reached completion in June 2019, aimed to develop different models of working in partnership with students in schools and in classrooms.

JCT and NCCA worked collaboratively with nine schools and over twenty teachers in two different Education and Training Boards in Ireland (ETB), Cavan/Monaghan ETB and Cork ETB. Much of this work involved supporting these teachers and their schools as they developed learning and teaching approaches that enabled students to become active agents in their own learning, taking early steps in a journey to enhanced student voice.

This collaborative work has key learning to share on the experiences of teachers and students pursuing more authentic student voice in the school and in the classroom. It also illuminates the impact a collaborative approach has on teacher professional development and the effect this has on students' experiences in

...THE PROJECT RECOGNISED
THAT ALL STUDENTS' VOICES
ARE UNIQUE AND EQUALLY
VALUABLE, IN KEEPIN GWITH
LEADING THEORISTS IN
STUDENT VOICE

the classroom. Tracing the journey of this project to date, reveals the opportunities and challenges that exist in embedding a culture of student voice in every classroom in every school in Ireland.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY STUDENT VOICE?

The models of partnership that were developed all hinged on the centrality of students in their own educational experience. Student voice is not understood as a collective or homogenous representative voice for students. Rather, the project recognised that all students' voices are unique and equally valuable, in keeping with leading theorists in student voice, Lundy (2009)

and Cook-Sather (2006). The work carried out over the three years sought to develop models that activate and develop the voices of all students in learning.

IRISH SYSTEM LEVEL LANDSCAPE FOR STUDENT VOICE

From a system level point of view, enhancing student voice in post-primary education in Ireland is supported by policy. The Department of Education and Skills (DES), recognises the significant role of students' voices in education. The School Self Evaluation Guidelines (SSE) for schools highlights the importance of including students' voices in evaluating practices in schools (DES, 2016). Whole School Evaluations also capture voices of students as a means of reflecting on the effectiveness of a school (DES, 2016).

In 2017 the Department of Child and Youth Affairs (DCYA) published their report 'So How was School Today?', which sets out the views of 3,242 young people, aged 12-17 from across all sectors of post-primary schools in Ireland. The findings reveal much about young people's experiences of post-primary education in Ireland and will inform policy.

The NCCA have been exploring ways of activating student voice in curriculum development for several years. They have been involved in a Learner Voice Project, a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum project and in 2012 they engaged students' voices in evaluating the

AUTHENTICALLY LISTENING TO STUDENTS' VOICES IS AT THE CORE OF JUNIOR CYCLE PROVISION IN SCHOOLS.

impact of Project Maths. With regards to junior cycle reform, NCCA worked closely with Dr. Paula Flynn, DCU, on facilitating students' voices in the process of drafting the new subject specifications. Currently, the NCCA are undertaking a significant review of senior cycle and students' voices from 41 schools are an integral part of this review process.

Most notably, enhancing student voice is an important aspect of the current junior cycle reform. The vision for junior cycle 'places students at the centre of the educational experience' and the Framework for Junior Cycle, 2015 (Framework) has been designed as a means through which this vision can be realised (DES, 2015). Student voice is a core aspect of the Framework as a child cannot take centre stage in their own educational experience if they do not have opportunities to exercise their voice. It is a flexible framework intended to be responsive to the needs of individual students in different school contexts (DES, 2015). A junior cycle programme need not be the same for every child in every school. Rather, junior cycle provision has the space to reflect the cultural context of a school and the needs of its students. Authentically listening to students' voices is at

the core of junior cycle provision in schools. If schools are to ensure that all students are engaging in a programme that best suits their needs, they must first listen to their students.

The Framework has been designed in a way that supports teachers and schools in approaching learning and teaching in a way that enables students to exert agency over their own learning. The introduction of a learning outcomes-based curriculum, an emphasis on the development on key skills and significant changes to assessment, where ongoing assessment values the synergy between formative and summative assessment, all provide opportunities for students to take centre stage in their own learning.

These core elements of the reform also provide the richest avenues through which students' voices are placed at the core of learning and teaching in classrooms and in schools. Hence, the objectives of the Erasmus-Student Voice project echo the vision of the Framework, which

places students at the centre of their own educational experience. Voice is central to this endeavour and calls on all stakeholders to reconceptualise what we value in terms of student learning. Given the similar aims, the work of the Erasmus project was situated within the context of Junior Cycle reform.

IRISH PROJECT APPROACH

The project partners in Ireland recognise that student voice cannot happen in a vacuum. Students will only truly become central players in their own educational experience, when they can voice agency over their own learning, if teachers engage with them in ways that develop this capacity. Teachers themselves will only feel

enabled to develop models of working in partnership with students if they are supported at school level and all partners in schools will need the support at system level if enhancing student voice is to become a central concern

As mentioned previously, JCT and NCCA are working collaboratively with three teachers and a member of school

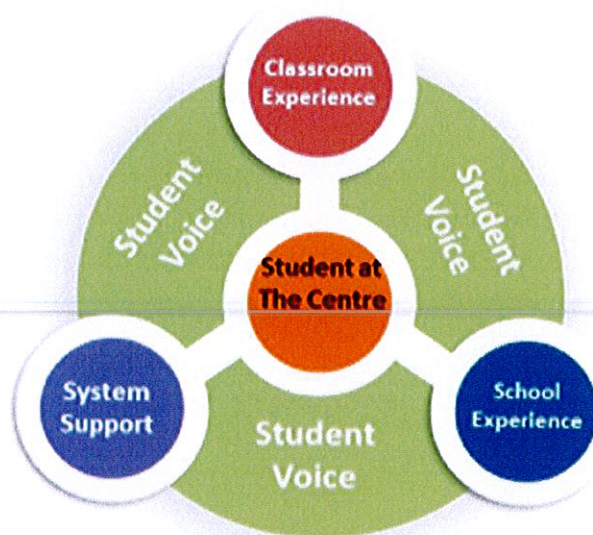


Figure 1: Levels of support

leadership in nine schools in Cavan/Monaghan ETB And Cork ETB. Both ETBs actively supported the project at all levels and fully supported the teachers and students at the heart of this work. Teachers are the key influencers on students' learning and they have a fundamental role in what happens in the classroom and how it happens (Fullan, 2006).

In keeping with a truly collaborative approach the teachers involved were included as one of the main stakeholders at every level of decision making. The collaborative approach taken in this project is very much in keeping with Hargreaves & Ainscow (2015). All learning must be grounded in cultural context and as such what works in one context may not necessarily apply in every school (Conway, Murphy, Rath & Hall, 2009). This is particularly true of working in partnership with students in schools and classrooms. Given the collaborative decision-making approach, models being developed between teachers and students varied from teacher to teacher and school to school, depending on the context and the choice of starting point.

One of the schools chose to focus on their SSE process and look at ways of embedding students' voices more fully in the evaluation process in their school. Other teachers explored

ALL LEARNING MUST BE GROUNDED IN CULTURAL CONTEXT AND AS SUCH WHAT WORKS IN ONE CONTEXT MAY NOT NECESSARILY APPLY IN EVERY SCHOOL

(CONWAY, MURPHY, RATH & HALL, 2009).

what kinds of active methodologies best provide avenues for students' voices to be heard in the learning space. Some participating teachers began to focus on how formative assessment practices like success criteria, peer assessment

and student reflection provide opportunities to activate and develop students' voices in the classroom space.

One school focused on its Wellbeing Programme and developed ways of engaging with students to design a programme that best responds to their identified needs. Regardless of the starting point, the end is always the same as they are all on a journey towards enhanced student voice for all students.

TEACHER AND STUDENT EXPERIENCES

According to Cook-Sather (2006), students have a unique perspective on being a student and as such their voices are integral to any discussion of students' experiences of learning. As synthesised by Dr Paula Flynn, (2018) activating and developing students' voices empowers students to participate in school life, encourages student engagement in learning, improves student-teacher relationships and encourages active, democratic citizenship. Teacher and student testimony from the

partner schools echo this theoretical base for enhanced student voice in education. Evidence from the project reflects that activating and developing students' voices is positively impacting students, teachers and the overall school communities.

Each of the participating schools experimented with ways to extend the models their teachers and students developed across the wider school community. The impetus for this appears to have come from students sharing with fellow students and teachers their experiences of learning in environments where their voices are being activated and developed. Testimony from these schools also suggests that the positive impact working in partnership with students is having on the professional lives of the teachers involved is spilling over into their day to day working lives and motivating other teachers to reflect on their practice. Significantly, evidence suggests that deepening the confidence of teachers in working in partnership with students is a key component of enhancing student voice in an authentic way in the classroom. Reflective feedback from the

**ONE OF THE STRENGTHS OF THE
IRISH CONTEXT IS THAT ALL
THREE LEVELS OF SUPPORT
WERE IN PLACE FOR THE
STUDENTS AT THE HEART OF
THE PROJECT**

participating teachers early on in the project highlighted how the power dynamic in the classroom is a space where teachers might feel most vulnerable. It took time and patience to come to the realisation that activating students' voices in the classroom doesn't open the floor to teachers being undermined. It is not a hand over of power. Rather, it is a more equitable balance of voices in the learning and teaching space. This is where the professional and the personal journey align in terms of professional learning (Timperley et al, 2007). In keeping with Guskey's theory of teacher change, once the participating teachers began to have authentic experiences of students' voices positively impacting learning and teaching, they became increasingly motivated to pursue other ways to further enhance students' voices in their classroom (Guskey, 2002).

GOING FORWARD

The Irish experience in this project reflects that the journey towards enhanced student voice takes time and needs to be supported at classroom, school and system level. One of the strengths of the Irish context is that all three levels of support were in place for the students at the heart of this project. Given the current educational reform climate, the system level support and most significantly, the commitment of teachers and schools to improved learning outcomes for students, embedding a culture of enhanced student voice in learning and teaching in Ireland has never been more possible.

- Conway, P.F., Murphy, R., Rath, A., & Hall, K. (2009). Learning to teach and its implications for the continuum of teacher education: A nine-country cross-national study. Dublin: Teaching Council Ireland.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, Presence, and Power: "Student Voice" in Educational Research and Reform. *Curriculum Inquiry* 36, 359-390.
- Department of Child and Youth Affairs (DCYA). (2017). So how was school today? Dublin: Government Publications.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2016). A guide to inspections in post-primary schools. Dublin: Government Publications.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2015). School self-evaluation guidelines for post-primary schools. Dublin: Government Publications.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2015). Framework for Junior Cycle, 2015. Dublin: Government Publications.
- Fullan, M. (2006). Quality Learning=Quality Leadership. IPPN
- Guskey, T.R. (2002). Professional development and teacher change. *Teachers and teaching: Theory and practice*, 8(3), 381-391.
- Hargreaves, A. & Ainscow, M. (2015). The top and bottom of leadership and change. *Phi Delta Kappan International*, 97(3), 42-48.
- Lundy, L. (2009). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927-942.
- Timperly, H., Wilson, A., Barrar H., & Fung, I. (2007). Teacher professional learning and development. New Zealand Ministry of Education