The Learner Voice Research Study:

RESEARCH REPORT

Embedding student voices in education discourse:
Curricular co-construction and development

Paula Flynn
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An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for giving me the opportunity to conduct this study in partnership with them. The experience provided for post-primary students the opportunity to have a say on curricular development and construction for the first time in the Republic of Ireland and in that regard, it was a ground-breaking initiative. I am extremely grateful to all the participants in this study which included students, teachers and principals from 20 geographically-dispersed schools around the country for their enthusiasm and candour throughout. Sincere thanks also to the subject development groups and most especially to the members of the Board for Junior Cycle who approved the initiation of this study and were consistently supportive throughout the process.

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Executive summary

The study set out to address two objectives:

1. To facilitate a process of student consultation on the development of new junior cycle curriculum specifications.
2. To determine *how* to include student voice in education discourse for participating schools and the NCCA so that there is:
   a. an embedded culture of listening
   b. a strategy to support a sustainable structure and response to student voices.

Since ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations [UN], 1989), Ireland has demonstrated a commitment to policy development to reflect the rights of children and young people. It is a requirement of this convention that opportunities are provided for children and teenagers to be heard on education matters so that their views are not just listened to, but given due weight (UN, 2003).

Evidence of the potential benefits of student voice engagement have been established in research literature, however, listening to students is not enough. Young people need to know they have been heard and to have their input and opinions acknowledged. Opportunities to involve students in curricular development and co-construction embodies democratic, collective responsibility for education reform. The significance of supporting students in building confidence and co-constructing language in order to meaningfully engage in curricular development and co-construction was central to the consultative process pursued within this study. The design of this process was influenced by and cognisant of Lundy's (2007) children's rights-based framework for participation, which prioritises 'voice, space, audience and influence' (Lundy, 2007; Lundy and Welty, 2013).

This study was initiated in September 2014 and concluded in May 2017. Although the methodology is predominantly qualitative, a mixed methods approach was conducted both to triangulate evidence and generate depth and breadth across that evidence. These tools included questionnaires, focus group interviews and individual interviews. Students, teachers and principals from twenty geographically-dispersed schools participated in the study at different data-gathering stages. In total, more than 350 students participated across the various stages of the consultations. Participants from across those schools participated in group interviews, individual interviews and the completion of questionnaires. Group interviews were also conducted with NCCA education officers, three subject specification development groups, and the Board for Junior Cycle.

In order to address the first research objective, volunteer groups of students across participating schools were consulted on the development of new specifications for junior cycle from which their perspectives were shared with subject development groups. These consultations spanned a period of two years across seven subjects: science; business studies; Art, Craft and Design; Gaeilge; music; Modern Foreign Languages; and history.

The overarching objective of this study was to determine how to include student voices in education discourse for participating schools and the NCCA so that there is an embedded culture of listening and a strategy to support a sustainable structure and response to student voices. To this end, a number of activities were organised between May 2015 and March 2016, which included seminars, workshops and the meetings of an NCCA-initiated student voice forum. The purpose of these activities was to support the research process in providing opportunities for schools to plan and share ideas on embedding a culture of listening in schools. It also allowed us to listen to the perspectives of students on proposed developments in relation to curriculum and assessment, thereby pursuing a methodology for including a sample of student voices in NCCA activity.

Significant learning with respect to the consultative process

- It must be emphasised that there is no 'representative student voice' and consequently, students' participation in this study was invited in order to elicit a sample of student feedback and perspectives. Consulting students on important issues in education should provide opportunities for young people to offer a range and similar sample of student voices rather than any expectation of a 'homogenous voice'. In the words of one participant, 'it shouldn't matter if there isn't a lot of us involved, it's more important that we **are** involved'.
- Where there was already a culture of student voice activity in a school prior to this process, students presented as more comfortable and confident in the consultation process.
- The process of student consultation on the development of junior cycle specifications confirmed to all the relevant stakeholders that students are indeed experts on their own experience of learning.
- The acknowledgement that both education officers and development groups were keen to find ways to work more closely with students beyond access to them as sources of data, reveals the success of this intervention in progressing attitudes on the importance of deeper engagement with students in curricular co-construction and partnership processes.
- Students
  - acknowledged the positive impact of being heard on their relationships with teachers and their peers
  - pointed out the potential for students to have a significant interest in subjects on which other students had an opportunity to contribute to curriculum reform and development
  - made links between their experience of being heard to their levels of self-confidence and 'sense of value'
  - indicated that the consultation process was important to them, and that they knew they had important contributions to make in education discourse which should be heard
  - appreciated some degree of formality within the consultative process as an acknowledgment of the seriousness with which their perspectives were received
  - expressed frustration at not having a chance to 'do more' or to pursue the consultative process further despite the positive experiences of their involvement in these consultations.

Learning with respect to embedding a culture of listening to support sustainable structures and responses to student voices in schools

- Students, principals and teachers acknowledged the most significant influence on their thinking with respect to progressing student voice activity in their respective schools was in witnessing concrete examples of good practice shared by students and teachers with whom they could relate and the opportunity to question and discuss the development of these structures.
- Principals and teachers
  - pointed out the importance of working to develop sustainable structures in their schools especially as a consequence of seeing the positive impact the student voice consultations had on their students
  - acknowledged that the development of such structures was not something which could be done *for* a school but necessitated a team effort from within.

Recommendations with respect to future consultations for the NCCA on curricular development

- It is important through the consultative process, to offer opportunities and appropriate media for students with additional needs to be heard.
- It is crucial that students can see where their perspectives and input have had an impact in consultative processes such as this.
- All parties involved in these partnerships of learning and co-construction should be mindful to ensure that the language used is a shared language within the co-construction.
- It is recommended to continue initiating consultations with students in schools over one or two meetings as before and generate a summary of **agreed upon** information to share with development groups. One suggestion in addition to this process is the organisation of follow-up working group meetings between representatives of students involved in the consultation(s) and the relevant development groups.
- An important stage in the process should be to check the 'interpretation' of what has been shared by students to ensure that it authentically represents the student participant perspectives and has not been '*adult*erated' (Flynn, 2013).
- It has been acknowledged in this study that students have the potential to contribute considerable expertise when they are given the opportunity to have a say on education matters, however, it is incumbent upon all education stakeholders to ensure that this is not an experience which is confined to research and occasional projects.
- The 'three meeting consultation model' as described in this report could be utilised in supporting a cultural shift in schools rather than exclusively for collecting data pertinent to the development of new specifications because it offers a model of good practice which could be shared with schools.

Recommendations for the NCCA with respect to embedding a culture of listening to support sustainable structures and responses to student voices

- Professional and state agencies relevant to education should share models of good practice and constantly query the absence of, or underrepresentation of student voices in education discourse.

- It is important that within the authenticity of student consultation and inclusion in education discourse, student expertise is afforded the same respect as that of other experts.

- There is some anxiety around whether 'everything' is captured or reflected in the dialogue with students and the extent to which a sample of student voices can be taken to represent the perspectives of a wider body of students. This anxiety might be mitigated if students were more regularly included in education discourse and if consultations and dialogical partnerships were more habitual occurrences.

- Teachers should be provided with CPD opportunities in order to support the process of embedding a culture of listening to students in schools, especially as that facilitation process is at the heart of junior cycle development and reform.

- This study offers a model for this dialogical learning space which includes the important elements of the children's rights-based model of participation, 'space, voice, audience and influence' (Lundy, 2007; Lundy and Welty, 2013). However, it adds to this model stages in the dialogical process that include: opportunities to check interpretation, i.e. avoid **adult**eration of young people's perspectives; feedback on how student perspectives have impacted or not; and pursuit of co-constructed change and development, where appropriate (see model p.42).

- Embedding sustainable structures both in schools and on a national level requires a dialogical process in *partnerships* with students, where all parties – policy makers, teachers and students – in this dialogue acknowledge that their roles are those of 'learners'.

- It is recommended that schools are supported further to disseminate examples of good practice and facilitated to share teamwork skills within a partnership of relevant state and professional education bodies.

Conclusion

Data collected from student insights in this study reflect national and international literature on the links between 'having a say' and wellbeing, identified most particularly in comments which link the sense of 'feeling valued' with being heard (Flynn, 2013; Simmons, Graham and Thomas, 2015). The importance of positive relationships between students and teachers was also highlighted as particularly significant (Smyth, 2015). Opportunities for students and teachers to share ideas and discover commonalities in aspirations and goals for learning, and the experience of the day-to-day school environment, provided tangible evidence of potential benefits in shared opportunities for communication, listening and being heard.

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

Introduction

Objectives of study

This report gives an account of the activities and learning generated through the learner voice research study (LVRS) from its initiation in September 2014 on behalf of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The study set out to address two objectives:

1. To facilitate a process of student consultation on the development of new junior cycle curriculum specifications.
2. To determine *how* to include student voice in education discourse for participating schools and the NCCA so that there is:
   a. an embedded culture of listening
   b. a strategy to support a sustainable structure and response to student voices.

Rationale for the project

Both nationally and internationally, there has been a growing significance in the importance of children's rights especially influenced by the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989. Article 12 – the right to express their views in matters affecting them and have their opinions given due weight commensurate with age and maturity; and Article 13 – the right to freedom of expression and to share information in any way they choose, which includes talking, drawing or writing (UN, 1989) are particularly relevant to this study. Ireland ratified this convention in September 1992 which subsequently led to the publication of a ten-year National Children's Strategy (2000); the establishment of Dáil na nÓg; the creation of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children; and the appointment of a Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. These developments, in addition to the launch of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making 2015–2020 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2015), represent policy commitments that Ireland has subscribed to, most particularly in providing opportunities to hear the views of children and young people.

Within education research and reform, 'student voice' is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) point out that there was vigorous pursuit of student voice research in the late 1960s and 1970s driven by the desire to build a fuller understanding of life in classrooms and schools. However, although this research yielded evidence that student voice had an important contribution to make, 'there was no general expectation, as

there is now, that the data would be fed back to teachers and pupils as a basis for informed action' (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007, p. 21). Since the 1990s there has been steadily increasing interest in the involvement and voice of young people in education research internationally.
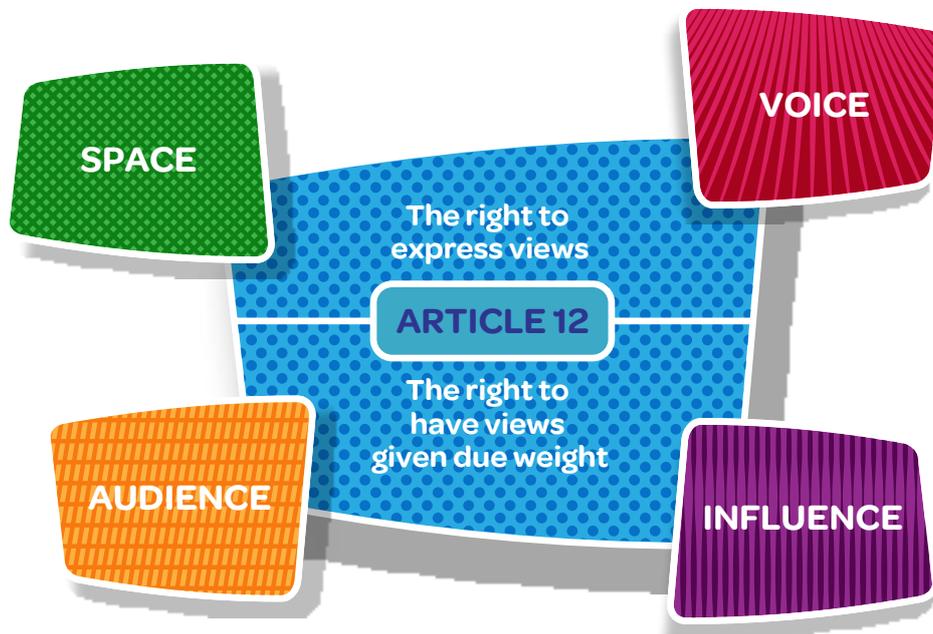
Student voice work is acknowledged in the literature as an opportunity to empower students to participate meaningfully and collaboratively in improving their experience of school (Fielding 2004: Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; Robinson and Taylor, 2007). Indeed, such consultative practice in schools has been shown to encourage student engagement in learning (Sebba and Robinson, 2010) and improve teacher-student relationships (Tangen, 2009). However, from her indepth study drawing on student perspectives, Smyth (2016) has identified that there can be a fundamental mismatch between the kind of teaching that engages students and that which prepares them for exams. A prevailing argument for the pursuit of such student perspectives recognises their expert role with respect to the knowledge and understanding of what it is to be a student (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Leitch, Lundy, Clough, Galanouli, and Garner, 2005).

Seventeen years ago, Rudduck and Flutter (2000) concluded from their research that young people have important insights on the teaching and learning environment which may serve as a 'commentary on the curriculum' but asserted that there are difficulties in eliciting their views on the curriculum beyond 'bits and pieces' such as, what does or does not engage them (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000, p. 75). As a consequence, they argued the necessity to support students in developing a language for 'talking about learning and about themselves as learners so that they feel it is legitimate for them actively to contribute to discussions about schoolwork with teachers' (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000, p. 76).

A significant motivation to support students to confidently engage in opportunities to change curriculum and instruction comes from research evidence that indicates this engagement can foster in students, a greater understanding of *how* they learn, and lead to a stronger sense of their own abilities (Mitra, 2003). Furthermore, there is also a body of literature which argues that student voice work should go far beyond ascertaining perspectives from young people and move towards a democratic process of shared curricular development and co-construction as well as a collective responsibility for developing solutions in education environments (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felton, 2011; Fielding, 2015; Shirley, 2015). This position resonates with the practical and theoretical pursuits inherent to this study. Indeed, Shirley (2015) contends that,

> ...it is not simply greater voice that may be needed in educational change today, but rather greater skills in listening to our students and attending to our colleagues. The ability to open one's mind and heart to diverse perspectives, including those that could challenge one's own expertise and status, appears to be badly needed in the uncertain profession that is education. (2015, p. 127)

This challenge with respect to 'greater skills in listening' echoes Lundy's (2007) caution that a common and cogent criticism levelled at Article 12 of the UNCRC 1989 is that it is easy for adults to comply with outward signs of consultation and ultimately ignore children's views. She explains that tokenistic or decorative participation is not only in breach of Article 12 but can be counter-productive. An essential element within the process of student voice in practice and research must involve a commitment to 'authentic listening' which is realised only through 'acknowledgement and response to the views expressed and suggestions made by student participants' (Flynn, 2014, p. 166). This is integral to Lundy's (2007) children's rights-based framework for participation which emphasises four essential elements: space, voice, audience and influence.

This model provides a way of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC which is intended to focus educational decision-makers on the distinct, albeit interrelated, elements of the provision. The four elements have a rational chronological order:

- **SPACE:** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view
- **VOICE:** Children must be facilitated to express their view
- **AUDIENCE:** The view must be listened to.
- **INFLUENCE:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

(Lundy, 2007; Welty and Lundy, 2013)

Irish research has demonstrated a number of potential benefits for students when their opinions are taken into account and they encounter an authentic response to their views and research input (Flynn, 2014). These benefits include a significant improvement in the quality of their relationships with teachers and their sense of belonging and connectedness to school, and, as a consequence, an improvement in self-reported levels of confidence and wellbeing; a heightened sense of being 'cared for'; as well as a general experience of comfort in their education environment (Flynn, 2014). It has been demonstrated that the development of caring relations and eliciting dialogue between and with students is important for the engagement of personal intelligences and to develop empathy and awareness of their rights and the rights of others (Flynn, 2013; Lynch and Baker, 2005; Noddings, 2005; Smyth, Down and McInerney, 2010). In their study which elicited perspectives from students on high-stakes testing at post-primary level in Ireland, Smyth and Banks (2012) explain that their data concur with international findings in highlighting the importance of students' experience of care, respect, trust and confidence in their relationships with teachers. Smyth (2015) draws on data from the longitudinal *Growing up in Ireland* study which clearly indicates the centrality of student-teacher relationships and the classroom climate as crucial influences on children's self-image and wellbeing. This is further corroborated in evidence from international research, which includes the United States, Britain and Australia, indicating a strong association between the quality of student-teacher relationships and 'a number of outcomes, including socio-emotional wellbeing, engagement in schoolwork, feeling a sense of belonging in the school, levels of disciplinary problems and academic achievement' (Smyth, 2015, p. 3).

The potential significance of student voice work and its impact on both student-teacher relationships and wellbeing is substantially supported in evidence from international research (Education Review Office [ERO], 2015; Glover, Burns, Butler and Patton, 1998; Sulkowski, Demaray and Lazzarus, 2012). For example, O'Brien (2008) similarly acknowledges the correlation between connectedness (sense of belonging), having a voice in school and respectful relationships as shown from research evidence in Canada (Anderson and Ronson, 2004) to enhance wellbeing. The results of an Australian large-scale study with 606 students between the ages of 6 and 17, which investigated how wellbeing is understood and facilitated in schools, discovered that students placed particular emphasis on the importance of opportunities to 'have a say' in relation to these matters (Simmons, Graham and Thomas, 2015). The students also indicated the significance to their wellbeing of 'improved, caring, dispute-free relationships with teachers, the principal and friends (with a) strong focus on the emotional support provided through relationships at school…as feeling loved, safe, happy and cared for' (Simmons et al., 2015, pp. 137–138).

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2015) establishes 'wellbeing' as one of the eight core principles of junior cycle education, envisaging that the curriculum should contribute 'directly to the physical, mental and social wellbeing of students' (DES, 2015, p. 13). Taking 'action to safeguard and promote their wellbeing and that of others' is identified as one of the 24 statements of learning with which junior cycle students are expected to engage as 'essential for students to know, understand and value' (DES, 2015, p. 14). The process of junior cycle reform and in particular the development of new specifications is central to this project and student voice engagement. The potential relationship between wellbeing and facilitating student voice is a significant factor in this study and is explored further through the process, most particularly within the establishment and medium of the NCCA student voice forum.

Methodology

This study is situated within a transformative paradigm and as such, the research is positioned in an emancipatory framework of inclusion, voice and empowerment (Creswell, 2003; Mertens, 2010). The terminology associated with this paradigm emphasises that the agency for change rests with the research participants pursuing 'the goal of social transformation' with the researcher and research team (Mertens, 2010, p. 8). This paradigmatic framework is appropriate to the learner voice study since the research objectives aligned with the processes and activities of the project deliberately sought to serve as a catalyst for change; most particularly, a change in attitudes and practice with respect to including the voices of students in curricular development and education discourse.

Ethical implications

Ethical approval for this study was sought and obtained from the School of Education, Research Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin in September 2014. Information letters were shared with participants and consent obtained at the various stages of data collection throughout the process of the study. All of the focus group meetings and some of the individual interviews were audio-recorded, for which consent was obtained in advance. Materials and data generated through the course of this study by the principal investigator (PI) were stored securely in a locked cabinet or on encrypted electronic devices. The names of participants and participating schools are not shared in this report to protect anonymity.[1]

Design of study

This study was initiated in September 2014 and concluded in May 2017. Although the methodology is predominantly qualitative, a mixed methods approach was conducted both to triangulate evidence and generate depth and breadth across that evidence. These tools included questionnaires, focus group interviews and individual interviews. Students, teachers and principals from 20 geographically-dispersed schools participated in the study at different data gathering stages. In total, more than 350 students participated across the various

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[1] It is important to distinguish between materials generated during the course of this project by the NCCA and those generated as an evaluation of the project by the PI with respect to obligations of anonymity.

stages of the consultations. Participants from across those schools participated in group interviews, individual interviews and completion of questionnaires. Group interviews were also conducted with NCCA education officers, three subject specification development groups, and the Board for Junior Cycle.

The participating schools represent a geographical span that includes the midlands, the south, the west and the east of the country[2]. Amongst the twenty participating schools, there are three Gael-Choláistí and 6 schools designated as DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools). Of these DEIS schools, two are rural-based. Fourteen of the participating schools are co-educational and six are single sex; (four 'all girls' and two 'all boys'). The following table presents a breakdown of post-primary representation:

Number	Type of school
7	Voluntary Secondary Schools
3	Community Colleges
4	Community Schools
2	Comprehensive School
1	Special School
3	Gael-Choláistí

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[2] Republic of Ireland only

Consultative process and activities

This section describes the activities which spanned two years of student consultation on new specifications at junior cycle level and describes how the process unfolded. The consultative tool which was developed during the course of the consultative practice in year one is outlined and explained in detail. Activities that were organised to facilitate discourse for participating schools about embedding a culture of listening and a strategy to support a sustainable structure and response to student voices are also identified.

Consultative process for curricular co-construction and development

The plans and objectives of this study and research collaboration were introduced to principals and teachers from four schools at a seminar in Trinity College Dublin on 23rd September 2014 by the PI and representatives from the NCCA. The four schools who were represented at the seminar had engaged in student voice research projects previously and as a consequence, were committed to facilitating further opportunities to promote a culture of listening in their schools. Although invitations were also extended to other schools at that time, principals declined the opportunity owing to industrial relations tensions around junior cycle reform. However, over the course of the two-year engagement, the number of participating schools increased to nine by the end of year one with a final figure of 20 schools having participated in the process before the end of year two. Additional schools were recruited mainly as a consequence of relationships on other NCCA projects but also because of subsequent declarations of interest in participation on hearing about the activities in some of the original participant schools.

2014–2015	2015–2016
Science	History
Business Studies	Music
Art, Craft and Design	Modern Foreign Languages
Gaeilge	Gaeilge[3]

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[3] Gaeilge was consulted on in both years in order to involve students from Irish-medium speaking schools (Gael-Choláistí) and English-medium schools to reach a broad sample of perspectives and experiences.

Over a period of two academic years, NCCA education officers visited schools who had volunteered to participate in this study to consult with student groups on the following seven subjects: science; business studies; Art, Craft and Design; Gaeilge; music; Modern Foreign Languages; and history.

The report focuses on the process of that consultation rather than specifics relating to the subject areas. In year 1 (2014–2015) the PI took an active and participatory role in many of the student focus group meetings. During that initial phase of conducting the student consultative meetings, at least one and sometimes two NCCA education officers facilitated and attended the meetings. The education officers focused on eliciting feedback and perspectives on student experience and aspirations for the different subjects targeted for discussion. The PI concentrated on the process of the student voice engagement and took the opportunity to question students in each focus group on their experience of the consultation and how it could be improved. The purpose of this was to ascertain the students' views and involve them, not only in the co-construction and development of new specifications but also in designing the consultation tool. As a consequence, this process was adapted and refined over the course of the year to reflect feedback and suggestions made by students. The objective was to present the NCCA with guidelines and a tool which could be replicated and further refined across subsequent consultations the following year. Within this design, it was also essential to plan for sustainability and for that reason, the consultative process with student focus groups in year two (2015–2016) was conducted by NCCA personnel only. The PI withdrew from attending the meetings with students and conducted an objective evaluation drawing on the perspectives and experiences of a sample of participants which included: students, teachers, and NCCA education officers. In order to ascertain what impact this process had made in the formal process of developing the final specification as well as the different stages in that progression, focus groups interviews were also conducted with three of the development groups and the Board for Junior Cycle.

Designing the consultation tool

The consultation tool design was initiated in year one in its most basic manifestation on meeting students in two schools who had volunteered to participate in the science specification consultation. Science teachers in the two participating schools were asked for approximately 15 student volunteers to include:

- students in senior cycle who had studied science for their Junior Certificate examination
- students in junior cycle who were currently studying science for examination
- mixed abilities and levels of interest in the subject area.

For this first consultation, two meetings were held with the student groups in both schools. The research team visiting the schools across those four meetings comprised the PI and either one NCCA education officer or two NCCA education officers. All focus group meetings were audio-recorded with pre-obtained parental/guardian consent and informed consent on the day of each meeting from the participant students[4]. The PI designed a brief handout and schedule of questions for the research team attending the first meeting with the student focus groups. This included a short introduction and rationale for the study, and questions which were designed firstly to encourage a discussion around their perspectives of student voice, and secondly to establish a shared understanding of the language relative to the specification for all participants, including the research team.

The penultimate stage of the meeting was an opportunity for the education officer to introduce a brief overview of the draft specification and clarify the meaning of any difficult terminology. A two-page summary of the specification was distributed to all of the students and they were asked to consider the document before the

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[4] This process of obtaining consent was adhered to for all subject consultations.

second meeting so that they could share feedback and recommendations at the second meeting. The final stage of the first meeting was a debrief on the student voice process and an opportunity to suggest improvements. The second meeting between the research team and the focus groups in each of the two schools provided an opportunity to discuss everything the students wished to say about their experience of science for junior cycle and their understanding of the draft specification. A significant amount of time before the end of the second focus group meeting was used to discuss student insights on the process of consultation and recommendations from them about how the experience might be improved.

Significant learning from these two focus groups elicited the need for organised time between meetings with the research team for students to come together, preferably with a specific task, to discuss the specification/subject area. Students indicated that it would be preferable if their teacher did not attend the focus group meetings. There was no objection from the co-operating teachers to this arrangement. The teachers agreed that it would be better for the process if the conversation took place between the researchers and the students only.

The two-page document designed to provide an overview of the draft science specification was found to be confusing and most of the students did not return to it after the first meeting. It was also suggested that three meetings with the research team rather than two was more realistic for informed discussion. Some of the younger students in each group indicated that they felt somewhat intimidated at being asked their opinions in the company of the senior cycle students. However, it was also suggested that more opportunities to meet, particularly between research visits might alleviate that anxiety. The commentary and feedback on the process was particularly positive with regard to having this opportunity to be heard, and despite some shyness on the part of the youngest students, was generally agreed to, across the age groups but with the strong recommendation that more time should be given to further consultations.

This valuable feedback influenced the design of the second consultation in this study; Art, Craft and Design (ACD). The ACD consultation was a different experience because nothing had yet been written for the background paper. This also influenced the design of the consultation process because the education officer wanted to capture as wide a range of perspectives as possible. The process included three focus group meetings with the research team plus the addition of two meetings in between visits to address specific tasks with the co-operation of the art teacher in their respective schools. The teachers were asked not to attend the first two focus group meetings in response to feedback from the science consultation and based on the fact that students believed they would feel more comfortable talking about the subjects if their teachers were not present. Some students also felt that out of loyalty to teachers they might feel uncomfortable identifying curricular areas in which they were less interested. However, teachers were invited to attend the last focus group meeting if they wished, to observe final feedback and presentations from students. The schedule of each of these five meetings had a particular focus:

First focus group meeting with research team

- Introductions, rationale and overview of the five meeting process.
- Establish a general understanding about the significance of student voice for participants – elicit student experience and perspectives.
- Co-construction and shared language on the topic of Art, Craft and Design. Ascertain general views from students about the subject area and their experience of this, to include what they liked/didn't like etc. and why they did or didn't choose to study the subject.
- Opportunity for education officer to pursue line of questioning based on student input – as a follow up to this meeting the education officer listens to the audio recording and based on the conversation, puts together 4 or 5 questions as a task for discussion at their interim meeting in preparation for the second focus group session.

First interim student meeting with the co-operating teacher

- Students discuss and respond to questions set by ACD education officer.

Second focus group meeting

- Group discussion between research team and student participants about their responses to questions – opportunity for ACD education officer to pursue line of questioning – discussion of student-led task for final focus group meeting.

Second interim meeting with the co-operating teacher

- Students choose medium for presentation of final insights and feedback for inclusion in the ACD background paper and reach consensus on delivery and content.

Third focus group meeting

- This session is predominantly led by the students who, through any medium of choice, deliver their final thoughts to the research team on the subject area with a view to influencing the background paper and subsequent ACD specification. The final section of this session is devoted to a group discussion on the experience of the process and an opportunity to elicit recommendations for improvement.

Three schools had volunteered for this consultation and again the co-operating teachers were sent consent/ information forms and asked to look for volunteer students to include the same profile as before, but also students who had chosen not to study art for their Junior Certificate examination or not to continue with it for senior cycle. Feedback was predominantly positive, with students repeatedly taking the opportunity to say how much they appreciated having the opportunity to participate and contribute to the process. There were a number of comments made on the following across the three schools: *the importance of listening to students; the experience made them feel valued and important; education is for young people so their opinions should matter;* and *they believed they had been heard.* The only negative comments that were made on the process were related to a miscommunication on the formatting of the student-led presentation in one school. It had been agreed in advance that the best way to capture the students' presentations would be to video-record the session. However, the students were keen to have the entire session recorded in one sitting rather than having their presentation inserted during an editing process, which consequently influenced and informed planning for final sessions with other consultative groups.

For the next stage of this study, students were consulted on draft specifications for business studies and Gaeilge in a process that was influenced by the design for the ACD consultation, which meant that five student meetings took place in total: three with the research team and two with the co-operating teachers for business studies or Gaeilge. However, the design was also influenced by what had been learned from the first phase of the study – the science consultation – and consequently it was agreed that a 'Prezi-style' presentation would be used to inform the student participants on the content of the draft specification rather than a handout. This presentation was introduced to students during the second meeting with the research team from which feedback was elicited. In a similar format to that used for the ACD consultation, student participants were given questions to address at their first interim meeting based on the substance of their discussion at the first focus group meeting. One member of the research team listened back to the audio recording and devised between four and six questions based on the content. The final session was also a student-led presentation, determined in style and medium by the participants. For the business studies consultation, guiding information and questions were offered to frame the student-led presentation. At the end of the consultation process with each student group, the education officer edited the video recording of the final student-led session to provide data and insights to the relevant subject development group.

Once again, there was important learning both in the content of the feedback on the draft specifications for the education officers and in the student voice process for the PI. Small suggestions for improvement often yielded considerable reward; for example, one piece of advice which was offered by a student at the end of the first consultation meeting for business studies suggested that the research team should bring a copy of either the Junior Certificate textbook or at least the contents page of same to remind senior cycle students of the course content. This resource proved to be very effective when meeting students at the next school for their first focus group meeting on the subject area. Students were very positive about their experience of the process and comments were shared which included: *this is such a privilege; I feel so lucky to be a part of this; I'd look at my subjects differently if I knew this happened before; I know we've been heard; It's important that the Department of Education listens to young people because we know what it's like to study in school now.*

The participants also suggested improvements to the process that involved ensuring every student had a chance to speak and pointed out examples of activities they felt were particularly effective during the process. They recommended the inclusion of ice-breaker activities at the beginning of every session and more opportunities for discussion in groups to support shyer and younger participants. The business studies focus group in two of the three participating schools indicated that they found the guidelines and guiding questions for their student-led presentation somewhat confusing. This was an interesting development as it was the only consultation which offered a framework for the student-led feedback as other groups were offered the opportunity to include whatever they wished without scaffolding.

By the end of year one, having compiled feedback on the process from student groups and NCCA education officers on what had worked well for all participants, the format of the consultation tool was refined and represented across a set of generic questions and activities which could be made more specific for any subject area but for which there was a rationale based on the engagement to date. Two versions of this consultation tool were presented with minor differences in content depending on whether the consultation process was taking place before or after the education officer had written the background paper[5]. The design also reflected student feedback which confirmed that three consultations with the education officer in the process was optimal, concluding with the student-led presentation as central to the final meeting. It also included the opportunity to set tasks for meetings facilitated by the subject teacher in the school between consultations, to give students the opportunity to reflect and prepare for feedback and also to promote more cohesion across the groups since they usually included students from different class and year groups who were not necessarily familiar with each other[6]. It was recommended that based on the experiences of education officers in year one, that where possible, students from three schools should participate in the consultation process and for each group to include a maximum of 15 students drawn from volunteers to include:

- students currently studying the subject at junior cycle level
- students who had previously studied the subject at junior cycle level who had chosen to continue studying it at Leaving Certificate level and also those who had decided not to study this subject at Leaving Certificate level
- students with mixed abilities and with additional needs
- students who expressed a particular interest in the subject and also those who did not.

[5] See Appendices A and B.

[6] Breakdown and content of each consultative session in Appendices A and B.

Some of the consultations had included students who had chosen not to study the subject at Junior Certificate level where they had had the option to avoid or drop it, however, the experience of those students was that they did not have much to contribute after the first session. For this reason it was agreed that including students who either struggled or had an aptitude for the subject contributed valuable insights, as did the perspectives of student who opted either to continue or discontinue their studies in this area *after* completion of junior cycle.

Year two of the curricular co-construction and development consultations

NCCA education officers facilitated consultations of students in participating schools in 2015–2016 in Gaeilge, history, music and Modern Foreign Languages within the framework of the consultation tool designed in year one. Engagement with students reflected different stages of the development process. The background paper had already been written when consultations in Gaeilge, history and Modern Foreign Languages were initiated, while the consultation on music was conducted prior to writing the background paper. Feedback on this experience is presented in the 'Evaluation of consultative process' section.

Culture of listening and a sustainable structure and response to student voices

The overriding objective of this study was to determine how to include student voices in education discourse for participating schools and the NCCA so that there is an embedded culture of listening and a strategy to support a sustainable structure and response to student voices.

In order to facilitate discussions for participants with respect to this objective, a number of activities were organised between May 2015 and March 2016, which included:

• one-day seminar in Trinity College Dublin, May 2015
• school-based workshops in preparation for discussions at a student voice forum (SVF) on 'student voice sustainability activity in schools' and 'reporting and assessment', September/October 2015
• first national student voice forum on topics outlined above, Wynn's Hotel, October 2015
• teacher voice seminar, supporting the process of student voice engagement, Ashling Hotel, February 2016
• school-based workshops on 'wellbeing' in preparation for SVF, February/March 2016
• second national student voice forum, Dublin Castle, March 2016.

The first of these dedicated days for group discussion and activities between students, teachers, principals and NCCA education officers in May 2015 focused on eliciting responses from tables of mixed participants on: why student voice is important; what areas of school life it could support or contribute to; how it could be initiated; and how it might be continued. Six post primary schools were represented at this seminar. As a consequence of the positive feedback shared on the experience of the day and the consensus that further dedicated days of this kind would support sustained discussions and opportunities for students and teachers to share ideas between schools, the NCCA decided to initiate a student voice forum. The purpose of the forum was two-fold:

1. To support the research process in providing opportunities for schools to plan and share ideas on embedding a culture of listening in schools.
2. To listen to the perspectives of students on proposed developments in relation to curriculum and assessment, thereby pursuing a methodology for including a sample of student voices in NCCA activity.

The first NCCA student voice forum took place in October 2015 and in order to prepare students to participate on the day, workshop materials were shared with co-operating teachers who were asked to facilitate meetings with their students in advance of the forum. The workshops were designed to provide opportunities for students to discuss ways in which a student voice culture could be built in their schools, to engage in concept checking activities and to encourage conversations and perspectives about 'assessment and reporting'. The event was attended by 63 students and 15 teachers (number includes principals) from 8 schools. Feedback from participants and also from NCCA education officers revealed a broad range of experiences across the schools in terms of student voice culture and support for the development or indeed initiation of that culture. It was also evident that some schools had completed the preparatory workshops which allowed for comfortable and confident discussion on the part of student participants, while others had obviously not been facilitated to engage in the preparatory workshop activities.

Conclusions drawn from this experience included the need to meet with teachers from participating schools for a day to discuss student voice in detail with them and to foster and encourage their involvement in activities associated with embedding a culture of listening in schools. With this objective, NCCA organised a teacher seminar held in the Ashling Hotel in February 2016 at which some teachers shared ideas and structures they were involved with in their schools and questioned presenters on topics all within the scope of student voice. The relationship between 'voice' and wellbeing was prioritised on the day and plans for the next student voice forum focusing on student perspectives of wellbeing were shared by NCCA personnel with the teachers. This was followed up with materials for preparatory workshops to prepare students for discussion a few weeks later.

The second student voice forum took place in March 2016 in Dublin Castle and was attended by 78 students and 39 teachers, which included school principals from 13 schools. The objectives of the forum were to elicit feedback from students on their perspectives of wellbeing as a concept, their perceptions of associations with 'wellbeing indicators' especially in their school context and views relevant to the development of a wellbeing curriculum. The forum was also committed to building capacity between teachers and students towards sustainable structures for listening to students in schools.

The PI took the opportunity to circulate questionnaires to participant students and teachers at the forum to ascertain: the usefulness of preparatory workshops; perspectives on both their experience of the forum and the pursuit of opportunities for students to be heard in schools. Participants were also invited to volunteer if they would like to participate in follow up interviews: 80% of students and 54% of teachers volunteered. Arrangements were subsequently made for individual interviews to take place either in schools or by Skype as preferred. In total, a random selection of 6 students, 2 teachers and 2 principals were interviewed from a cohort of 20 schools that had participated across all of the activities of the study.

Evaluation of consultative process

In order to present an evaluation of the consultation on new specifications, the following discussion provides a synopsis of perspectives drawn from participants with different roles in the process. These roles include: NCCA education officers; students; teachers; principals; members of specification development groups; and members of the Board for Junior Cycle.

Data were generated from the participants using the following methods:

- focus group interviews with NCCA education officers, three development groups and the Board for Junior Cycle, August 2016 to February 2017
- questionnaire responses from students, teachers and principals from the student voice forum, March 2016 (78 responses)
- individual interviews conducted October 2016 to May 2017 with:
  - 6 students
  - 2 teachers
  - 2 principals.

Synthesis of perspectives drawn from the NCCA education officers' focus group meeting

During a focus group interview with NCCA education officers (August 2016), it was generally agreed that their experience of the process was mostly positive and they were very conscious of how appreciative students were at having their say and having the opportunity to give input on the specification developments. However, the group observed the marked differences between schools with respect to students' confidence in articulating their perspectives. This inter-school divergence did not reflect the socio-economic status of schools as some of the most constructive and confident consultations were experienced in DEIS schools. A significant factor identified was whether or not there was a culture of student voice activity already evident in the school prior to this process. Where schools encouraged student voice activities across the school, students were more comfortable and confident in the consultation process, with one education officer commenting that the 'richest data' were obtained in these schools because students were already confident about expressing their views.

The intensive and time-consuming nature of the process was also acknowledged. The group was in agreement on the necessity to capture the rich responses to the engagement on the subject areas from the first student consultative meeting because students' contributions can become overly refined and distilled in preparation for the video recording of the final consultative session. The first and second meeting with consultative groups were noted as more energetic and spontaneous, whereas this vitality was often missing in the final video-recorded

session. An interesting observation which was put forward by one of the education officers reflecting on this, suggested that the student consultative meetings (1 and 2) appeared to have more energy because it felt as though students were experiencing the opportunity to express and to hear each other's views on curriculum content for the first time, whereas the final meeting formalised the process and stifled the energy. In fact, the observation was made that the quality of thinking was no different by the third meeting but perhaps just easier to record. It was observed that if the consultation could take the form of one meeting only, it would be easier to reach more schools and hear more students' voices as a consequence. However, the point was made that perhaps it was more important to focus on a more effective method of capturing data from the first encounter than necessarily reducing the number of consultative meetings. It was also suggested that the 'three meeting consultation model' could be more significant in supporting a cultural shift in schools rather than collecting data pertinent to the development of new specifications as it offered a model of good practice which could be shared with schools.

The experience of the education officers in relation to whether or not a background paper was in place at the time of the consultations suggested that it did not really make much difference in terms of the engagement. Instead it was preferable to focus on the 'big ideas' and blank page approach to the consultation, because students presented as more engaged in these discussions rather than being curtailed to discuss what had been written in the paper. The education officers were also conscious of the potential within their engagement to lead the student feedback or to be selective in choosing what they perceived as valuable data.

The importance of encouraging the voices of children with additional needs and finding ways to ensure that they are heard if they present as uncomfortable or reluctant to share in groups was highlighted. It was also acknowledged that a broad range of students with learning difficulties participated both in the specification consultations and the national student forums. Students used different media to communicate as suited them best which included availing of support from their teachers from special units/schools. In one school a student drew images of different aspects of the curriculum which had presented as obstacles to her learning and chose to shred the sheet as a visual representation of her contribution to the consultation process.

 The need to maintain the process of language co-construction as part of the process to ensure that feedback from students was consistently in a format with which they were both comfortable and familiar was agreed upon. In some situations it was felt that co-operating teachers had influenced the direction of the discussion between consultations so that feedback messages sometimes changed from the messages shared in the original sessions. This was identified as a dilemma because although the education officers wanted to access student perspectives exclusively, it was felt that involving teachers in the process, i.e. the 'between session meetings' was also important in order to support or develop a culture of sustained student voice activity in schools. The focus group of education officers was unanimous in its view that it would be a positive development in this process to request that these 'between' meetings be facilitated by teachers drawn from a different subject area to that which was being consulted upon, which could also mitigate the power dynamic in the teacher-student relationships. It was suggested that teachers should be provided with CPD opportunities in order to support the process of embedding the culture in schools and building capacity around the facilitative process especially as that facilitation process is at the heart of junior cycle development and reform.

In response to eliciting ideas on how to improve and refine the consultation tool, the most popular recommendation was to meet students either once or twice prior to writing the background paper. Another meeting should be arranged to share details on the background paper once written, in order to reflect the synthesis of expert input including student perspectives, and consult their response and feedback on this. The rationale for this amendment is based on providing for an initial student input in response to a less-structured engagement at first, followed up with the opportunity for a more structured engagement and response to the developmental process so that students can see where they have influenced the direction of the specification. However, this would also provide for students to see where their views had not been taken on board, similar to the experience of all expert

contributions. In addition to this, the possibility of arranging a third meeting with members of the development group and bringing together all of the schools that had been consulted on this specification in a working-table format for half a day, were discussed as viable and positive progressions in the consultation process.

Synthesis of perspectives generated from students, teachers, principals and development groups

This recommended change to the consultation process provides also for a response to concerns shared by students and development groups. In a synthesis of data drawn from student questionnaires and views shared during interview discussions, the young people were very positive about the experience of participating in the consultation groups and indicated that during the process, they believed they were heard and that their input had the potential to make a difference. The majority of students, however, indicated that they were disappointed not to see evidence of where their input had influenced or indeed how their suggestions converged with or diverged from that of other experts. One student's observations reflected similar comments from peers when she said, 'having this chance was like really powerful, it made me feel that we could really make a difference to learning in [specific subject mentioned] you know? But like, I wanted to be, and so did the others I think, we wanted to see it through from beginning to end and not just being somewhere in the middle.'

The appetite for including students further in this process was also shared by a number of development group members who were unanimously positive about the opportunity to access student perspectives but many believed that the video footage to ascertain those perspectives was 'incomplete', 'insufficient' 'overly edited' or simply a snap shot which often lacked context or depth. Many members articulated that they would like the opportunity to follow up with students and discuss their ideas further. A number of suggestions were made on how to facilitate this which included inviting students to join a development group meeting, conducting conversations by Skype or indeed visiting a school. One education officer organised a meeting between the development group and a school that had participated in the consultation process as an opportunity to progress discussion on the development of the specification. His report on the meeting indicated unanimous agreement from the development group members that it was a very worthwhile and positive exercise which should be repeated at different developmental stages.

As a consequence of concerns raised by education officers and development groups on how best to capture the richness of student perspectives to share with development groups, students were asked about this in interview. From a sample of six students, five had participated in video-recorded, student-led presentations that had provided a summary of feedback and insights on the specification consultation process. Two of the students enjoyed the experience of the video-recorded sessions and one student shared, 'I felt that when we were being filmed, it meant this is really serious and lots of people are going to know we did this and see it, it made it real. I thought it was exciting.' The other student commented, 'I thought that doing the video bit was a good idea because it meant we were all preparing together and gave us an end piece, it was like a purpose. I wouldn't like to think that all of it wasn't used though or like it was only the best bits. All of it was important. It made it important but I enjoyed the other meetings better, I was very nervous with the camera.' The other four students with varying degrees of emphases indicated that the video-recorded meeting was the least enjoyable experience of the consultation because they felt 'stressed', 'self-conscious' or that the meeting had become overly 'formal', 'less relaxed'. Despite this, they all agreed that capturing their views in what may have been a less comfortable medium also gave them the sense that they were being taken seriously and that the video footage would serve as a source of evidence of their input. However, one student was adamant, 'I think there could've been much better ways of doing that bit.' This feedback correlates with education officer concerns and observations with regard to the most interesting aspect of the consultations being outside the video-recorded session. However, it is also significant that students are keen that their input should be situated in a format which reflected evidence of their engagement.

A prominent theme expressed across the development groups pointed out what was perceived as lost potential in not providing for teachers in these groups to utilise their proximity to students in their respective schools in order to ascertain and represent more student perspectives. Some teachers, as a consequence of listening to student input presented by education officers, chose to go back to their students to elicit their insights and indeed to determine if their views were similar to those expressed in the video footage they had seen. Students were asked about this and other matters with respect to teacher participation in the consultation process. Overwhelmingly they responded that it was better to have a smaller number of students involved in the consultations but also said, 'you need to hear what we have to say directly from us' and 'I prefer that we get the chance to speak to people outside our teachers about this because it makes it more important. You can't help thinking that they'll [teachers] maybe get their own ideas over yours'; and also 'you know that you're really being taken seriously because they [NCCA] are the ones who are responsible for all the courses and subjects so when they ask you questions you feel special.' One student commented, 'it shouldn't matter if there isn't a lot of us involved, it's more important that we **are**[7] involved'. The same student, when reflecting on the consultation meetings and the preparatory meetings that were facilitated by her teacher in between, commented, 'I really like my teacher, she's brilliant but she has very strong ideas about [subject] and she was definitely trying to influence some of the stuff we wanted to say and because we like her and she knows more than us, you could see some people were kind of changing their minds and stuff.' Three of the other students, however, indicated that the teacher-facilitated meetings between consultations were very useful and their teachers were very supportive and interested in the activities. All of the student interviewees agreed that they favoured the opportunity to have a number of meetings with people from outside school to give them an opportunity to comment on and contribute to curricular development. This, it was believed, confirmed the importance of their contributions.

General comments that were volunteered by students at different stages of the consultation process include the following:

- 'The experience has improved my confidence and it has also changed, in the best way, some of my relationships with other students and teachers.'
- 'I have an increased sense of how important like it is when people want to hear your opinions.'
- 'It makes us feel so important knowing we're the first ones in the country to do anything like this. I hope the department of education understand that we're the ones who really know what it is to be a young person in a classroom right now and to be learning. Nobody knows better than yourself what works for you and what doesn't.'
- 'Knowing that you have been heard is a powerful feeling, especially when you are consulted on your learning and education.'
- 'I have a better appreciation of other people's opinions now. I even think we respect each other more and it definitely matters you know that we can trust one another.'
- 'I feel like why doesn't this happen more, only we know what it's like to be learning this now.'
- 'This is such a privilege.'
- 'I feel so lucky to be a part of this.'
- 'I'd look at my subjects differently if I knew this happened before.'
- 'Even if students doing the new junior don't like some bits of the courses, if they know that some students got a chance to make changes I'd say they'll be more interested and even curious.'
- 'I know we've been heard.'
- 'I enjoyed working on this because it's really important and I wanted to do it.'
- 'I realise there is so much more we can do...I want to do more.'

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[7] Participant's emphasis on 'are'.

An overview and synthesis of the most common questionnaire responses specific to their experience of the second student voice forum on wellbeing from students included the following:

- 'I feel valued.'
- 'This made me feel important.'
- 'My confidence has improved.'
- 'I didn't think I'd have anything important to say but people at the table were listening to me.'
- 'I don't think we should just have days like this, wouldn't it be great if we had 'listening' schools, look at what we could do.'
- 'I think we are looking at each other differently, the teachers seem to respect us more.'
- 'We know what we are talking about so grown-ups need to listen.'
- 'A lot of kids are struggling but if they had a voice it would make it easier I think.'
- 'We are really and truly making a difference to the way things will be done in schools, that's sick!'
- 'There's a big difference between my school and some of the things I heard today from students in other schools. We have a long way to go before we'll have that trust in our place.'
- 'I've become a leader in my school because of this and so have the others in our learner voice team. We take it very seriously and we know that we are taken seriously. We've given workshops to teachers on how to help young people to have the confidence to get involved in important decisions in school and the last big thing that we did was to spend a full day doing similar workshops with all the first years so that they will see that we are serious about this being a school that listens to students and they can help to keep that going.'
- 'Respect our right to be heard – I feel valued when you listen to me.'
- 'Build student voice into as many school activities as possible.'
- 'We want to be taken seriously. Give us a chance to have an influence on more important things in school.'
- 'We want learner/student voice teams not student councils.'
- We didn't know students and teachers had so much in common.'
- 'Sometimes we learn more important things just by getting on with each other and talking.'
- 'It's really interesting to hear different opinions and understand different experiences but also to realise that we can understand each other probably better than anyone else.'

Interviews with teachers and principals indicated that they were interested in supporting the process of embedding a response to student voices in their schools especially after seeing the impact the consultation engagement had had on their students. One teacher commented:

> One of our students has a specific learning disability and she also has an anxiety disorder. I was surprised that she volunteered to get involved in the wellbeing workshops because she's not really a joiner you know? She has a little friend who was in one of the subject groups who really enjoyed it and encouraged her to get involved. Boy, was I wrong. She was very quiet in the workshops but obviously enjoyed them so I encouraged her to go to Dublin Castle and the principal and I couldn't get over her because she was engaged and after a little warming up was contributing and thoroughly enjoying herself. I kept an eye on her when she moved to another table to people she didn't know and honestly, she was talking as much as everyone else around that table. She has asked us since if she could get more involved with student voice since that day.

As part of the activities on the day of the second student voice forum, March 2016, one group of students gave a presentation on how they and their school have been very proactive in embedding structures to support and encourage students to take leadership roles especially with regard to student voice activities. This presentation and opportunity to see and hear of such activities had a significant impact on student and teacher participants that day. When asked in the questionnaire about what was most memorable about the day, this student presentation was the choice of 74% of teachers and 81% of students. One principal during his interview commented, 'They set the bar very high, I wouldn't have believed you'd see that in an Irish school but it just goes to show what you can do when you have a team on board.' The other principal who was interviewed said that her students had been impacted by the presentation and curious to know how they could do something similar in their school. She observed, 'I think it sank in with me that nobody is going to do this for us you know? I think we kind of felt that getting involved in the NCCA work would somehow magically bring about positive change in our school but we've had a great opportunity to see what is possible and it's up to us, together I mean in the school, to see how we can rise to that challenge'.

Some other comments from teachers and principals submitted on the questionnaires which reflect a popular stance across the responses include:

- 'As adults we have a responsibility to make this happen, you can see the impact it's having.'
- 'I can't believe how some of our lot have stepped up to this, I'm so proud of them, they deserve it, all kids deserve to be heard. And actually, they don't even know half time that it's their right to be heard.'
- 'It was really impressive to listen to the students from [school A], it just shows you what can happen when people work together.'

The questionnaire was also useful to determine whether the preparatory workshop materials had supported participants in preparing for the student voice forum on wellbeing. Students responses on average, rated the workshops 'very useful' (68%) across 'wellbeing' preparation with regard to language preparation and 'very useful' (74%) in preparing for the day in general. Asked to indicate how useful the preparation was with respect to 'why student voice is important' the majority response was 'useful' (61%) with 'least useful' indicated by 20%.

Synthesis of perspectives drawn from members of the Board for Junior Cycle

During a group interview conducted with the Board for Junior Cycle in November 2016, feedback from their perspectives and experience of student consultation on new specifications highlighted their support for the continued objective to find ways of including and listening to students in education discourse. One member pointed out that she had great confidence in the manner in which this process has been carefully embedded as an example of good practice but also cautioned that there is a requirement on the part of all state agencies to provide opportunities for young people to be heard on education matters in democratic processes under obligations since Ireland's ratification of UNCRC 89 and indeed under subsequent recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. As a consequence, it is essential that in a system of schooling where students are exposed to democratic values and citizenship values, students must be actively listened to within a democratic process.

The continuing challenge on how to capture student perspectives authentically and fully without distilling selectively in order to meet objectives within the specification development process was raised as an important issue in the evaluation of this process. One member reiterated that it is difficult to impart the richness of student

perspectives ascertained over a period of four to six hours in an edited format to a development group and in subsequent reports. Queries were raised with regard to the challenges of mixing year groups in consultation and to what extent we can claim that student contributions impacted on the final specification or whether their contributions could be overly mediated. However, counter-arguments pointed out that contributions from all sectors are similarly mediated in the practical process of developing the final objective. It was also pointed out during the discussion that different education officers incorporated the views of the students they had consulted in different ways through the background paper, reports and in the final specification. Some chose to weave insights from all experts throughout the documents without attributing them to any particular sector while others chose to highlight a section on student voice within documents such as the background paper. There were no impositions on education officers or development groups to present this within a specific template, however, it is important to point out that in the final specification, contributions are not identifiable from any group.

Recommendations and conclusions

This final section focuses on the research objectives and highlights some recommendations and conclusions drawn from what has been learned as a consequence of this study.

The process of student consultation on the development of junior cycle specifications confirmed to all the relevant stakeholders that students are indeed experts on their own experience of learning (James et al., 1998; Leith et al., 2005). The tool which emerged from the first round of consultations served as a template but just as it was adapted over the course of the first year of data collection as a consequence of continuous feedback and learning, it became evident that there were aspects of the process which were less adequate than others. In particular, it became evident that the practice of editing a larger sample of video footage to share insights with development groups became increasingly unsatisfactory for all involved. Students and education officers agreed that the first two discussion meetings were enjoyable, relaxed and productive, and on balance, the spontaneity of these sessions impacted positively on the richness of the data compared to the constraints within the formality of capturing insights in recorded sessions. On the other hand, it was also evident that students appreciated some degree of formality within the process as an acknowledgment of the seriousness with which their perspectives were received. This resonates with the importance for young voices to have an audience and to experience the potential of their perspectives to influence change (Lundy, 2007; Lundy and Welty, 2013). Despite the positive experiences of their involvement in these consultations, some students expressed frustration at not having a chance to 'do more' or to pursue the consultative process further.

The inherent challenge is how to balance a meaningful engagement with young people where their views are captured in a way that reveals all of their perspectives, while also meeting the constraints of time efficiency and resources. It is evident that there is a shared anxiety across many of the participants around how to address this so that student voices are authentically rather than tokenistically heard, cognisant also of the significance of 'the feedback loop'. The acknowledgement that both education officers and development groups were keen to find ways to work more closely with students beyond access to them as 'sources of data' (Fielding, 2015) reveals the success of this intervention in progressing attitudes on the importance of deeper engagement with students in curricular co-construction and partnership processes. A recommendation of this study is to continue to initiate consultations with students in schools over one or two meetings as before, and generate a summary of **agreed upon** information to share with development groups. An important stage in that process should be the 'interpretation' of that information to ensure that it authentically represents the student participant perspectives. The next stage of the process should involve follow-up working group meetings with the relevant development groups as was suggested by the education officer focus group. This would provide an important opportunity to progress discussions in dialogue rather than through a medium of 'reporting'. These working groups could include all of the schools who had been consulted on a particular specification, and cultivate 'learner partnership' deliberations with members of the development groups across different working group tables.

It is also important that all parties involved in these partnerships of learning and co-construction are mindful to ensure that the language used is a shared language within the co-construction. It was frequently mentioned during this study that the language of 'final specifications' can be inaccessible to many groups so for meaningful dialogue, it is important that the process of working with students is determined and led by the student language on the topic in that co-constructive space. It is also significant that students with additional needs participated in this study, however, in progressing this meaningful engagement, it will be necessary to continue offering different media as opportunities to express perspectives across the myriad of ways students choose to express their feelings (Robinson and Taylor, 2007).

Another concern which was expressed across participants was whether 'everything' that students had said had been captured or indeed whether their perspectives would be evident in the final specifications. A practical response to this emanates from the practice that is already in place when consulting with experts traditionally on curricular reform from which insights are typically distilled and the final document presents a synthesis of influences. It is interesting, however, that there was an expectation across many adults in this study that with respect to student input this should somehow be different. This report suggests that if students were more regularly included in education discourse and if consultations and dialogical partnership were a more habitual occurrence, this may also mitigate some of the anxiety around whether 'everything' has been captured or reflected. It is incumbent on all parties, and in particular stage agencies to share models of good practice and constantly query the absence of, or underrepresentation of, student voices in particular. It is also important, however, that within the authenticity of the experience that student expertise is afforded the same respect as that of other experts.

Similarly, when perspectives of a sample group of experts are invited to contribute in matters of education discourse, it is not anticipated that they are representative of all their peers, nor should this ever be the expectation of students, as students are not an homogenous group.

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

In order to embed a culture of listening in education discourse, whether in schools or on a national level, it is necessary to adopt an approach across state agencies, leading by example in such activities to include students as a matter of course and consistency. Adult participants in this research and others (Flynn, 2014; 2015) acknowledge the expert insights on the part of students when they are given the opportunity to have a say on education matters, however, it is incumbent upon all participants to ensure that this is not an experience which is confined to research and occasional projects. Moreover, embedding a structure both in schools and on a national level to ensure sustainability requires a dialogical process in partnerships with students, where all parties in this dialogue acknowledge that their roles are that of 'learners'.

This study as a consequence offers a model for this dialogical learning space with a presumption to influence change and transformative practice, and which fosters leadership and agency within that experience. The model includes and starts with the important elements of the children's rights based model of participation, 'space, voice, audience and influence' (Lundy, 2007; Lundy and Welty, 2013) but adds to this model stages in the

dialogical process that include: opportunities to check interpretation, i.e. avoid **adult**eration of young people's perspectives (Cruddas, 2007; Flynn, 2013); feedback on how student perspectives have impacted or indeed if not, why not; and pursuit of change and transformation as appropriate.

TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE

1
Space, voice, audience and influence
(Lundy 2007)

2
Check interpretation – avoid adulteration

3
Feedback

4
Facilitate change

5
Pursue and facilitate further dialogue

LEARNER VOICE SPACE

VOICE OF THE LEARNER

(Flynn, 2013)

Integral to this model is also the acknowledgement of the potential impact of learner voice engagement, most particularly in a school setting, to impact positively on student-teacher relationships, encourage a sense of empowerment and agency, and foster leadership potential.

Data collected from student insights in this study reflect national and international literature on the links between 'having a say' and wellbeing, identified most particularly in comments which link the sense of 'feeling valued' with being heard (Flynn, 2013; Simmon et al., 2015). The importance of positive relationships between students and teachers was also highlighted as particularly significant (Smyth, 2015). Opportunities for students and teachers to share ideas and discover commonalities in aspirations and goals for learning, and the experience of the day-to-day school environment, provided tangible evidence of potential benefits in shared opportunities for communication, listening and being heard. These benefits were acknowledged by students *and* adults as part of this experience and resonate with Fielding's (2015) argument for:

> ...an increasing reciprocity between generations...[because]...evidence from cutting edge, successful innovation in schools in the last decade points to its powerful, immensely positive educative potential for adults and young people alike...[which calls for]...structured inter-generational dialogue promoting active listening, recognition of shared concerns and collective responsibility for developing solutions. (Fielding, 2015, p. 26)

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

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Appendix A

Learner Voice Research Study

Student consultation tool – background paper
written in advance

Session 1

Introduction

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this student voice initiative which involves the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment consulting young people on changes to the curriculum on specific subjects for junior cycle study and assessment.

The purpose of this discussion is to access student insights on proposed changes to 'subject X' as part of the new Junior Cycle Framework.

Your focus group represents a sample of student voices in this school and has the important task of contributing ideas towards creating a new specification for this subject. A specification lays out what students will learn, how they will be learning and reasons (aim and rationale) for these decisions. The specification also lays out how assessment will support students as they are learning in this subject area and how they will be assessed for certification.

You have the opportunity to impact on curricular content and construction in this subject area by commenting on a background paper which has been put together as part of the development of this process and contributing ideas on content and assessment towards the final version of the new specification. Following discussions with a number of experts, including students in secondary schools around the country, the final version will be formalised for the future teaching and learning of subject X at junior cycle level. Your input and insights are essential to this process and have the potential to make a very significant contribution to reshaping the teaching and learning of this subject for the future. We hope that our experience of working with you on this process will inform how the NCCA and schools around the country can incorporate student voice prominently in future activities that are important in the education of all young people in Ireland.

PART 1 OF SESSION 1: **Why 'student/learner voice' matters**

These questions are designed to introduce the students as part of a focus group to the consultation process and to develop a shared understanding about the importance of the process:

- How important is it for you to have a voice on matters that affect you?
- Where do you have a voice now? Does it make a difference?
- Do you know why you should have a voice/are entitled to have a voice?
- Do you think that you should have a say (or any influence) with regard to your education?
- How would being heard make a difference to you or your fellow students?
- Have you ever felt that it would be easier for you to learn if you could contribute ideas on 'teaching and learning'? Or, have you ever had the opportunity to suggest a better way of doing things in school to help you and your classmates learn and participate in school?
- What opportunities are there in this school for students to be heard on school or education matters? For example, have any of you been involved in 'student voice' activities in the school before, or been invited to participate in 'student voice' activities outside the school? If not, are you aware of opportunities that arose for students in your school over the last 12 months for example, and what if any, feedback did you hear as a result?
- When you hear 'student voice' and 'learner voice' – do they mean different things for you? Which do you prefer?
- When you hear the word 'curriculum' – what does it mean for you?
- When you hear the word 'assessment' – what does it mean for you?
- What do you know about the new junior cycle? We are inviting you to participate in this discussion because we value your opinion about developments we are working on in the junior cycle.
- Do you think the Department of Education should consult students about changes that are being made in the curriculum? Why/why not?

PART 2 OF SESSION 1: **Working towards a shared understanding and co-construction of language around subject X for the new specification**

- Who has studied/is studying this subject at junior cycle level?
- (If appropriate, depending on subject area) Who chose not to study this at junior cycle or, decided not to continue with it after junior cycle?
- What did you/did you not/do you/do you not like?
- If you had your way, what would you get rid of within the curriculum? What would you keep?
- What 'words' or 'ideas' or 'concepts' come into your mind when you think about the study of this subject?
- Do you use this language (or use it differently) in any other subject? (optional and depending on previous answer)
- What should be the aims within the study of this subject?
- What would you like to see on the curriculum that would make it more exciting/accessible/attractive/interesting/enjoyable?
- Do you have any questions about the intention to makes changes in relation to this subject area at junior cycle level and if so, what are they?
- What are the most effective ways of assessing this subject from your experience? What are the least effective ways?
- What would be the most effective way of examining/assessing this subject at junior cycle level?

PART 3 OF SESSION 1: Bring focus of group towards task for session 2

Provide a brief overview and summary of this entire process and the structure across the three consultative sessions. Clarify purpose of meetings to be facilitated by their subject teacher between sessions 1&2, and 2&3 for further discussion, planning and preparation.

Overview

1. Consultative session 1 – general introduction to the process; introductory question and answer session on the subject; explanation of task set by education officer in preparation for next consultation which will focus the discussion on important aspects of the background paper for feedback, commentary and criticism (3–4 questions for student discussion before next consultation).
2. Session 2 – feedback from group exercise and further discussion around what to include/remove in development of new specification. Outline of final task for student-led presentation in session 3.
3. Session 3 – **student-led presentation** – potential to video-record this session subject to consensus and consent.

PART 4 OF SESSION 1: Final comments

- What do you think of this process so far? Would you have any suggestions about how we could/should do this differently?
- Do you have any other insights/suggestions/comments that we should think about before our next meeting?

Session 2

1. Concept check exercise to consolidate ideas from first meeting.

2. Feedback from students based on their discussion meeting.

3. Feedback, commentary and criticism of aspects of background paper shared by education officer.

4. Ideas on content to include/remove in new specification.

5. Expectations around student-led presentation for final session for discussion and opportunity to chat about how it might be presented; ask students if there are any other questions they feel might best support their response to what should/should not be included in the design of the specification. Task for last meeting is to prepare a student led presentation using any medium or format decided upon by the student group.

6. Finally, what did you think of the process so far? How could it be improved upon?

Session 3

1. **Student-led presentation** of insights, feedback and comments on background paper and advice on content towards development of specification, and future teaching and learning of this subject at junior cycle level.

2. Debrief on the student voice process and potential for further opportunities to embed student voice practice in school activities.

Appendix B

Learner Voice Research Study

Student consultation tool – earliest stage of
development

Session 1

Introduction

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this student voice initiative which involves the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment consulting young people on changes to the curriculum on specific subjects for junior cycle study and assessment.

The purpose of this discussion is to access student insights on proposed changes to 'subject Y' of part of the new junior cycle framework.

Your focus group, which represents a sample of student voices in your school, has the important task of contributing ideas towards creating a new specification for this subject. A specification lays out what students will learn, how they will be learning and reasons (aim and rationale) for these decisions. The specification also lays out how assessment will support students as they are learning in this subject area and how they will be assessed for certification.

You have the opportunity to impact on curricular content in this subject area at the earliest stage of development and construction because the new course has not been designed or written yet so your insights are valuable and important to this process. As a result, your input has the potential to make a very significant contribution on reshaping the teaching and learning of subject Y for the future. Following discussions with a number of experts, which includes you and other students in secondary schools around the country, a draft of the new course will be offered first for approval to the NCCA and then a final version will be formalised for the future teaching and learning of this subject at junior cycle level.

PART 1 OF SESSION 1: Why 'student/learner voice' matters

These questions are designed to introduce the students as part of a focus group to the consultation process and to develop a shared understanding about the importance of the process:

- How important is it for you to have a voice on matters that affect you?
- Where do you have a voice now? Does it make a difference?
- Do you know why you should have a voice/are entitled to have a voice?
- Do you think that you should have a say (or any influence) with regard to your education?
- How would having your voice heard make a difference?
- Have you ever felt that it would be easier for you to learn if you could contribute ideas on 'teaching and learning'? Or, have you ever had the opportunity to suggest a better way of doing things in school to help you and your classmates learn and participate in school?
- What opportunities are there in this school for students to be heard on school or education matters? For example, have any of you been involved in 'student voice' activities in the school before, or been invited to participate in 'student voice' activities outside the school? If not, are you aware of opportunities that arose for students in your school over the last 12 months for example, and what if any, feedback did you hear as a result?
- When you hear 'student voice' and 'learner voice' – do they mean different things for you? Which do you prefer?
- When you hear the word 'curriculum' – what does it mean for you?
- When you hear the word 'assessment' – what does it mean for you?
- What do you know about the new junior cycle? We are inviting you to participate in this discussion because we value your opinion about developments we are working on in the junior cycle.
- Do you think the Department of Education should consult students about changes that are being made in the curriculum? Why/why not?

PART 2 OF SESSION 1: Working towards a shared understanding and co-construction of language around subject Y for the new specification

- Who has studied/is studying this subject at junior cycle level?
- (If appropriate, depending on subject area) Who chose not to study this at junior cycle or, decided not to continue with it after junior cycle?
- What did you/did you not/do you/do you not like?
- If you had your way, what would you get rid of within the curriculum? What would you keep?
- What 'words' or 'ideas' or 'concepts' come into your mind when you think about the study of this subject?
- Do you use this language (or use it differently) in any other subject? (optional and depending on previous answer)
- What should be the aims within the study of this subject?
- What would you like to see on the curriculum that would make it more exciting/accessible/attractive/interesting/enjoyable?
- Do you have any questions about the intention to makes changes in relation to this subject area at junior cycle level and if so, what are they?
- What are the most effective ways of assessing this subject from your experience? What are the least effective ways?
- What would be the most effective way of examining/assessing this subject at junior cycle level?

PART 3 OF SESSION 1: Bring focus of group towards task for session 2 and give an overview of the three sessions

Provide a brief overview and summary of this entire process and the structure across the three consultative sessions. Clarify purpose of meetings to be facilitated by their subject teacher between sessions 1 & 2, and 2 & 3 for further discussion, planning and preparation.

Overview

1. Consultative session – general introduction to the process, introductory question and answer session on the subject, discuss task set by education officer in preparation for next consultations (set of questions chosen to reflect discussion from first meeting).

2. Session 2 – feedback from group exercise and further discussion around what to include/remove in development of new specification. Outline of final task for student led presentation in session 3

3. Session 3 – **student-led presentation** – potential to video record this session subject to consensus and consent

PART 4 OF SESSION 1: Final comments

- What do you think of this process so far? Would you have any suggestions about how we could/should do this differently?
- Do you have any other insights/suggestions/comments that we should think about before our next meeting?

Session 2

1. Concept check exercise to consolidate ideas from first meeting.
2. Feedback from students based on their discussion meeting.
3. Ideas on content to include/remove in new specification.
4. Expectations around student-led presentation for final session for discussion and opportunity to chat about how it might be presented; ask students if there are any other questions they feel might best support their response to what should/should not be included in the design of the specification. Task for last meeting is to prepare a student-led presentation using any medium or format decided upon by the student group.
5. Finally, what did you think of the process so far? How could it be improved upon?

Session 3

1. **Student-led presentation** of insights and advice on content towards development of specification, and future teaching and learning of this subject at junior cycle level.
2. Debrief on the student voice process and potential for further opportunities to embed student voice practice in school activities.

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment