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Parent and student voice in evaluation and planning in schools

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Abstract

Current approaches to the regulation of schools in most jurisdictions tend to combine elements of external inspection with systems of internal self-evaluation. An increasingly important aspect of the theory and practice of both, but particularly the latter, revolves around the role of other actors, primarily parents and students, in the process. Using literature review and documentary analysis as the research method, this article explores the research literature from many countries around the concerns of schools and teachers about giving a more powerful voice to parents and pupils. Then, focusing on Ireland, this article tries to clarify three things, official policy concerning stakeholder voice in school self-evaluation and decision making, the efforts by schools to implement this policy and the response to date of school leaders and teachers to this rather changed environment. Using Hart's ladder of genuine, as opposed to token, participation, it is argued that policy mandating parental and student involvement has evolved significantly, that schools have responded positively and that there is little evidence, as yet, of teacher concern or resistance. This response is explained by the low stakes and improvement-focused education environment; the controlled, structured and simplified nature of the self-evaluation process; and the limited extent of parental and student participation in decision making.

Keywords

Parent and student voice, school inspection, school self-evaluation

Introduction

There has been an increased interest in, and demand for, school evaluation in recent decades with the work of teachers and schools becoming the subject of critique (Ottesen & Stephens, 2019).

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According to Baxter (2019), over the last 20 years, the external inspection of standards and quality of education has gained enormous credence throughout the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD is now a major player in education with global influence and has done much to encourage education to be perceived as a process governed by inspection, assessment, and comparison reports (OECD, 2014). The education sector has been subject to ever greater scrutiny, and educators are facing heightened levels of surveillance, regulation and bureaucratic scrutiny (Murphy, 2019).

While most education systems now have some form of external inspection system (Brown et al., 2018), the growth in popularity of school inspections has also seen inspectorates across Europe develop new methods of evaluation that respond to increasing levels of decentralised school governance (Baxter, 2017). In consequence, there has been a major change in the conceptualisation of both what constitutes quality and where, how, and by whom it is to be assured. Traditionally, quality assurance was perceived as being the responsibility of the government, but schools are now required to implement their own school-based policies (Brown et al., 2016). In order to improve the quality of education, there is now an expectation, or requirement, in many systems that schools monitor and improve what they deliver themselves (Mac Ruairc, 2019). As Vanhoof et al. (2009, p. 21) point out, schools 'are increasingly being asked to shoulder a greater proportion of the responsibility for developing and guaranteeing educational quality'. This is what is often referred to as school self-evaluation (SSE).

Thus, in summary, current approaches to the regulation of schools tend to combine elements of external inspection with systems of internal self-evaluation. Importantly, an increasingly key aspect of the theory and practice of both, but particularly the latter, revolves around the appropriate role of other actors, primarily, parents and students in the process. This is the focus of this article.

The move towards a more significant role for these stakeholders was bound to arouse concerns and has already generated a considerable literature about the misgivings of other actors, notably teachers, in relation to this development. We examine this in the next section. We then proceed to report on some recent research in Ireland which identifies the increasingly significant roles for parents and students envisaged by official policy and, to an extent at least, executed in school practices. It is noted that, as yet, these new policies and practices have not generated staff concerns and resistance but have, to a large degree, been well received. Finally, in the concluding section, it is speculated that this quite positive response may perhaps be a function of the low stakes, limited accountability and non-threatening nature of school evaluation in Ireland.

Method

Documentary analysis was used as the research method for this article and consisted of two distinct phases. In the first phase, using an integrated library and online search mode, the EndNote software programme was used to search for peer-reviewed research and government policies on stakeholder voice in school evaluation. At the end of the search, 278 research papers and policy documents were used for final analysis. Following this, using a deductive content analysis process (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), the next step involved the development of six categories relating to stakeholder voice in school evaluation:

- The idealistic nature of student voice
- The divisive nature of student voice
- The threatening nature of student voice
- The idealistic nature of parent voice
- The divisive nature of parent voice
- The threatening nature of parent voice.

This was followed by the development of a structured categorisation matrix and the coding of data according to these categories.

Using Ireland as a case example, the second phase of the study involved a document analysis of a random sample of documents from 20 post-primary schools to ascertain the extent which parents and students are involved in the SSE process. Within this, a range of documents was analysed including the school's values/vision statements, self-evaluation reports and school plans. Of note, however, is that a limitation of this approach is that schools may not necessarily document the process of engagement in each case. For example, parents and students may have been involved in the development of school policies, and while the policies are generally available in documented form, the process of developing them may not have been outlined in all cases.

Resistance, objections and drawbacks to parent and student voice in schools

The idealistic nature of student voice

A role for students in evaluation and decision making referred in the literature as 'student voice' has become common in many jurisdictions and commonly involves consultation on internal school evaluation and planning activities such as, for example, feedback on school policies, quality assurance, and in some cases, staff appointments. However, student voice has by no means become an entirely accepted feature of school life, particularly among teachers. Issues concerning the reliability and validity of student input are widely reported (Burr, 2015). An 'ideology of immaturity that gets in the way of our seeing students as responsible and capable young people' (Grace as cited in Rudduck & Fielding, 2006, p. 225) as their world is steeped in social practices that are labelled as 'childish' and/or 'cultish' (Gunter & Thomson, 2007). Indeed, teachers, and others, often believe that they know better or consider young people to be too immature to make a worthwhile contribution (Lodge, 2005). As Comeau (in Glover, 2015, p. 27) puts it,

> One of the difficulties that organisations face in developing children's participation is the attitude and culture that views children as too young or vulnerable to be capable of being included in decision making.

Bragg (2007a, p. 510), for example, gives examples of some unsatisfactory answers given by primary school students when asked for their views on what they would change about their school: 'We don't like always having to do English and Maths in the mornings, why can't we do it in the afternoon?' and 'It's too noisy in our class because the radiator makes a noise'. During the recruitment process for a new teacher, Bragg (2007a, p. 512) highlights the unrealistic requests or judgements of students as the teacher recalls the answers she received when she asked the students what kind of teacher they wanted to be hired:

> Initially, I get all the standard answers, 'somebody with a sense of humour, kind and pretty', it is like they want a Mary Poppins!

For some teachers, the lack of credibility of student voice could stem from their disappointment with, and disapproval of, elections to student councils. According to a teacher in Pérez-Expósito's (2015) research

> No matter how much you explain to them that it (the elections for the student representatives) has to be an electoral process, and what generates the votes are the proposals, they (the student candidates) do the same (as in politics): they give a candy (to the students), promises that are unrealistic . . . illogical things . . . we always fall in the absurd. (p. 363)

It is therefore unsurprising that teachers can be reluctant to engage with student voice if they are presented with unrealistic and trivial requests and suggestions and from students that they consider not to be taking the democratic process seriously. As Leren (2006) points out, if the primary concern of a student council is for the presence of a drinks machine in the school canteen, for example, the lack of motivation among staff to facilitate a democratic school is understandable.

The divisive nature of student voice

Further limitations of student voice also stem from the actual voice being spoken. Gunter and Thomson (2007), for example, point out that some voices speak louder than others. Some students may struggle to articulate themselves using appropriate language and may be concerned about how their 'contributions' will be perceived by teachers (Hall, 2017), and the more self-assured and articulate students may dominate consultative conversations and be more readily 'heard' (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). According to McIntyre et al. (2005), student voice could, therefore, inadvertently serve as a 'dividing practice' (p. 150) that segregates confident and articulate students from the rest. Keddie (2015) asserts that such 'selective listening' (p. 231) is because 'we wish to hear' (p. 244) the voices of certain students. This mediated form of selective bias is also reported by Robinson and Taylor (2012), who found that certain groups of students are sometimes invited and/or selected to participate in projects that seek student input:

> It just came naturally to choose who to be involved, it's what we do, we use our judgment to choose who we think is the most suited. (Secondary school teacher)

> I suppose we didn't really question the fact that staff chose us to be involved, that's just what we're used to in school. (Secondary school student; p. 38)

Robinson and Taylor's (2012) research point out that neither staff nor students questioned the selection process and a 'taken-for-granted' mode of selective bias was a cultural norm that existed between teachers and students. Keddie (2015), however, points out that it is not only teachers, or adults, who can maintain these power relations, but students as well. Either way, the concept of 'student voice' does not always allow for all students to speak and to be heard.

The threatening nature of student voice

It is unlikely that all staff in a school will be in favour of increasing student voice (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Issues such as time constraints are regularly cited as preventing teachers from fully engaging with student voice (Brown et al., 2017). Other reasons may include resourcing issues (Lewis & Burman, 2008) as well as issues of space, architecture and timetabling (McIntyre et al., 2005). Woolner et al. (2007) also suggest that there may be problems with consulting students about school design because they will inevitability be moving on as they progress through the system, leaving school staff in a better position to give more balanced, long-term views of needs. Some teachers also appear to be somewhat dismissive of various conceptions of the student voice processes and defensive about how they consult students in their everyday practice. Cooper and McIntyre (1996) point out that teachers in the absence of formal mechanisms of engagement quite frequently take account of students' perspectives as part of their everyday classroom practice. This is evident in the following comments of some teachers, who are reluctant to engage in student voice at a formal level:

> but I listen to children all the time anyway! (Bragg, 2007a, p. 509).

> I give them the rules, but I explain to them, and if there is any problem, if there is any inconformity, we talk about it. But I give the reasons. It is not that we do what I say, but 'look boys this is the reason'. (Pérez-Expósito, 2015, p. 361)

Other teachers, however, do not entertain the idea of student voice and are thoroughly opposed to it:

> Sorry kids, you are not the authority in the classroom. Me Teacher. You student. Me Teach; You Learn. End of discussion. Education is not a business. You are not my customer. My classroom is not Burger King. You do not get to have it your way. Courtesy and respect does not extend to their ideas, which may or may not be given a hearing depending on the instructor's preferred teaching style, and which may be summarily dismissed if they are judged to be beside the pedagogical point. Treat them as human beings with inherent dignity by all means; but don't treat them as sages before the fact. (New York Times as cited in Burr, 2015, p. 31)

Teachers may also be concerned about student voice due to the possibility of receiving unanticipated (and sometimes unwanted) messages (Sellman, 2009), or what might be referred to as 'uncomfortable learnings' (McIntyre et al., 2005, p. 154). Ferguson et al. (2011), for example, found that several teachers were surprised by students expressing negative thoughts about teachers and classrooms. Students too are aware of the consequences of voicing negative feedback:

> They might get offended, because it's not nice if you say, like, 'Our lesson is rubbish' –they'll get upset about it. (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006, p. 81)

However, while teachers may be anxious about receiving negative feedback from students, arguably, even more worrying for them is how student feedback positions them in relation to other teachers. Bragg (2007a) describes students getting used to the flexible approach of their teacher and then reacting badly to their new teacher's methods, leaving all involved upset and angry, and in the teacher's case, 'demoralised' (p. 508). How teachers are perceived by their students and colleagues is important to them, and their self-efficacy, and can have a damaging impact if this is not in high regard. For example, a teacher in Demetriou and Wilson's (2010) research admitted, 'I am sensitive to how students and staff perceive me, and this affects my relationships with them' (p. 59). It is probably unsurprising, therefore, that some teachers admit to engaging in student voice projects as a 'PR exercise' to counter what they perceive to be as their negative reputation among students (Bragg, 2007b).

According to Mitra (2008), teachers are used to being in control. However, there is a concern that student voice will undermine the authority of teachers and fundamentally change historically deep-rooted power relations in schools – the argument being that too much of an emphasis on student voice could have a negative effect on the totality of stakeholder engagement; that is, the voice of the teacher is diminished (Flutter, 2007). This perspective resonates with Whitty and Wisby (2007), who felt that it was ironic that in some instances, students were being offered more say in decision making than teachers.

The idealistic nature of parent voice

Much like student voice, parent voice is often championed as an empowering process that will improve standards in education. Parent empowerment refers to the parents' role in exercising influence within a school, typically through decision-making forums, and usually affords parents some degree of authority and power (Bauch & Goldring, 1998). In England, for example, parent power has been promoted as a solution to educational ills (Leaton Gray, 2013), with a particular emphasis

on choice of school. There are, of course, many perceived limitations to parent voice in education. Common teacher barriers to increased parental involvement include a lack of time, institutional atmosphere and teacher attitude, and a fear of criticism (Shearer, 2006), and, more extremely, fears over potential decreases in the professional status and general wellbeing of teachers (Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009).

The attitude of parents may also be dependent on their own past experiences with schools and schooling (LaRocque et al., 2011). Furthermore, they may be discouraged due to perceptions that their children may be put into a vulnerable position if they take a critical stance on school policies (Sliwka & Istance, 2006), or if they feel that they lack the resources to make their voices heard (Tveit, 2009). Many parents are also constrained by work commitments and child care difficulties (Harris & Goodall, 2008). These barriers may also be intensified in schools that find it difficult to get parents to serve as governors (see, for example, Ranson et al., 2005; Xaba & Nhlapo, 2014). In England, for example, James et al. (2014) point out that recruiting post-primary school parent governors can be somewhat more difficult than in primary schools and suggest that it could be especially difficult in disadvantaged settings. This also appears to be the case in Ireland, where although board members can fill a variety of duties, there are also issues surrounding the capability of schools to form a board that has the capacity to carry out all the required duties of school boards. As stated by an inspector in Brown (2012),

> And there is a problem though, and I don't think anybody could deny that, and that is the problem that they are a voluntary board and particularly in areas of disadvantage. It is difficult for schools to get a correctly constituted board. It's difficult for them to get people, certainly from the locality, who would have the capacity and the willingness on a voluntary basis to do the work that needs to be done. So, there is a building capacity in relation to Boards of Management and volunteers as well. (p. 12)

The divisive nature of parent voice

An implicit assumption in the literature is that stakeholders hold similar conceptions of what counts as parental involvement, but this assumption is problematic (Barge & Loges, 2003). According to Lawson (2003), the perceptions parents and teachers have of the meanings and functions of parent involvement are different. Baker (1997) also argues that teachers and parents differ in how they perceive parental involvement, with teachers taking a narrower view (e.g., school-home contact) and parents taking a broader view (e.g., attending and participating in school activities that may, for example, include teacher evaluations). At a fundamental level, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) suggest that parents and teachers may also differ in their understanding of the relationship between schooling and education:

> If education is largely about schooling then logically it is teachers that possess the greatest knowledge, skills, power and expertise. If however, schooling is merely a part of education, then there is a clear shift in power and expertise towards parents. . .To put it succinctly, 'Should school teachers educate children while parents humbly support the schools? Or . . . Are parents the main educators of their child, while schools supplement home-learning with specialist expertise? (p. 45)

Further limitations may be based on the ability of parents to effectively contribute to school decision-making, or at least overcome the negative perceptions school staff may have of their level of competence. In Italy, for example, Dozza and Cavrini (2012) conclude that parents do not appear to have a clear understanding of what constitutes teacher competency, the classroom climate, the organisational culture of the class and the school itself. In more extreme cases, such as in South

Africa, one of the significant challenges is the illiteracy rate of parents involved in school governance (Duma, 2013). As one primary school principal explains

> The language there is, you know, the legal language issue . . . and as is well-known, parents are by and large not educated or versant with legislation, while the language is difficult. To start with, as a principal, it's difficult for you to understand fully. So, it becomes even more difficult with the parents. (Xaba & Nhlapo, 2014, p. 430)

Parent voice can, therefore, be divisive in that it has the power to segregate teachers and parents, rather than partner them. Even in instances where parents are able to engage with schools and are included in the decision-making process (e.g., being a school governor), as with student voice, not all parents' voices are heard to the same effect. Vincent and Martin (2000), for example, report that it can be difficult for any controversial parental views to get a hearing, while some parents may only attend meetings for their own self-serving ends.

The threatening nature of parent voice

Within a discourse of 'partnership', the locus of power changes (Barge & Loges, 2003) and just like with student voice, teachers are wary of the potential parent voice has to undermine them and hold them more accountable. As Inglis (2012) notes, the balance of power can shift from professionals to parents in a consumerist model. Further to the above examples in an English context, Bulkley (2005) refers to some schools in the United States as providing parents with means to express their dissatisfaction through greater voice. Indeed, with parents gaining more confidence in utilising their 'rights', they may pose a threat to teachers' professionalism (Crozier, 1998). For example, Dor and Rucker-Naidu (2012) compared the attitudes of teachers in the United States and Israel towards parent involvement and found that

> The teachers mentioned parents who questioned the teacher's authority and professionalism. In some cases, parents do not trust the teacher's judgment, and this leads to inappropriate, contemptuous behaviour toward teachers. Being exposed to these kinds of reactions may cause tension and insecure feelings among the teachers. (p. 253)

However, greater reservations, tensions, and challenges were expressed among the Israeli teachers (Dor & Rucker-Naidu, 2012). Previous research from Israel by Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren (2009) indicates that teachers' least favoured school context is one in which parents are empowered more than them. Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008) also report that 'on the whole, the teachers expressed concern and distress about parents' increasing power and control over their work and practices' (p. 403). The comments from Israeli teachers can, therefore, be very insightful in terms of how parent voice can be damaging to teachers' sense of professionalism:

> It is an invasion of our privacy. Parents come to school and criticise our work. They can do whatever they want. (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008, p. 403)

> I punished one of my pupils and told him he couldn't leave the class during the break because of his behaviour. Then I got a phone call from the child's mother telling me that I obviously don't know how to control her son and that she forbids me from punishing him in any way. (Dor & Rucker-Naidu 2012, p. 254)

Consequently, teachers who feel insecure in meetings with parents, or who worry about possible threats to their professional expertise tend to keep a distance when communicating with them

(Westergård, 2007). Reflecting on past experiences where ‘parents could come in and take pupils out of detention’ (p. 142), a deputy headteacher in Martin and Vincent’s (1999) research, who admitted to previously feeling insecure and undermined, explains his school’s current stance on parent involvement:

> Before (under the previous headteacher) parents did have the upper hand somewhat. (The current head) is certainly into accountability . . . we are all very much accountable to parents in terms of exam results and in terms of whatever the pupils require. But I think we, that’s as far it goes. We like to make sure they know their role and we don’t like them to interfere . . . We are not into consultation. Certainly no collaboration . . . If you like it, fine, if not you can go and that is your choice . . . Certainly that is the attitude we give. (p. 143)

Research from Norway reports that teachers may try to limit the influence of parents by emphasising their own professionalism, thus leaving parents with the role as supporters (Bæck, 2010). In the United Kingdom, Crozier (1999, p. 225) reports that parents’ respect for teachers’ professionalism was considered to be very important to teachers, A common response from teachers was that parents should keep their distance and know their place, just as they themselves did regarding other professionals. As one Year Head contends,

> again, it comes down to my professionalism. I’m a great believer in this, I mean at the end of the day should people have a greater say in the treatment by the doctor? . . . I suppose they have an input and I’ve got absolutely no objection to that whatsoever. But there’s very few people that would actually want to be in the doctor’s place, making the doctor’s decisions . . . (But) at the end of the day everybody, anybody is an excellent teacher but they wouldn’t put themselves in that situation as a doctor, or as a solicitor etc. (p. 225)

More recent research from England also found that teachers tended to assume authority on educational matters while parents played a supporting role or acted as passive receivers of information. In the majority of conversations between teachers and parents, the flow of information was predominantly from teachers to parents, with teachers selecting the topics for discussion, deciding who would speak, and focusing on the knowledge that only they possess (Bilton et al., 2018). Indeed, the literature shows that teachers do approve of parent involvement once it does not relate to their professional work in the classroom (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). However, Ule et al. (2015) explored parental involvement in the educational trajectories of children in Europe and found that parents not only realise that the future of their child depends on the work of the teacher but also to a great and growing degree on parents as co-educators, meaning that teachers’ classroom expertise may be called in to question:

Some parents suggest that teachers should adopt a more individualised (teaching) approach, taking the individual personality of students into account; for example, one Italian parent proposed that

> Teachers should change their methods: sometimes it is too schematic and too much based on the assumption that pupils are part of general categories. They should try to see pupils according to their way of expressing themselves. (Ule et al., 2015, p. 343)

This understandably can be threatening for teachers and is unlikely to receive a warm reception from them as alluded to in the following teacher comments,

> What I would not want is parents coming in and actually saying, you know, ‘he’s not teaching that lesson right. (Crozier, 1999, p. 225)

Table 1. The ladder of participation (Hart, 1992).

Degrees of participation	8. Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults
	7. Child-initiated and directed
	6. Adult-initiated shared decisions with children
	5. Consulted and informed
	4. Assigned but informed
Degrees of non-participation	3. Tokenism
	2. Decoration
	1. Manipulation

> We know our subject, and we know what the exam boards require and I think, hopefully, we know the best way to teach. (Crozier, 1999, p. 226)

The literature makes clear that the involvement of both students and parents in any substantive way in many aspects of school activities can be problematic from the perspective of school leaders and staff. Given these sensitivities, it might be expected that involving these actors in the evaluation of schools would not be as straightforward as is sometimes implied in officially policy which can be at odds with the reality on the ground.

Stakeholder voice in SSE

SSE is an internal process which aims to ensure quality, improve the teaching–learning process and increase school performance (Hofman et al., 2009). While school principals are still designated as the formal leaders of schools, other organisational members and stakeholders are coming to play a significant role in influencing school decision-making, although to very varying extents. (Ni et al., 2018). SSE, for example, is no longer the sole responsibility of principals and their senior leadership teams, but a more democratic process that includes stakeholders such as students and parents:

> Recent developments across many systems have included the participation of a wider range of stakeholders. This is a positive shift, as a wider range of perspectives is likely to offer more detailed and complex insights into the depths of the organisation. (Chapman & Sammons, 2013, p. 22)

Key stakeholders such as teachers, students and parents, it is suggested (Brown et al., 2017; Odhiambo & Hii, 2012), know the local context better than those in central government. They can, therefore, provide detailed knowledge, valuable insights and constructive feedback on how to improve schools. Thus, calls for greater participation in decision-making have often been championed in the literature as a progressive way of making schools more democratic and more efficient (Mokoena, 2011).

There are, however, varying degrees of participation in decision making that can range from tokenism in the form of engaging parents and students with negligible decisions to that of a genuinely reciprocal process of shared decision making as described in Harts (1992) ladder of participation (Table 1).

We turn now to some recent research on Irish schools to illuminate the types of roles and tasks for stakeholders envisaged in official policy and the extent of the implementation of that policy in a sample of schools. Evolving school evaluation policy suggests roles for parents and students which are at a higher level of participation on Hart's ladder than anything previously contemplated. In fact, it is arguable that policy now demands a transition from non-participation to participation at around level 5 of Hart's framework.

To get a closer look at these realities, we now proceed to examine some of the recent research on the involvement of parents and students in school evaluation in Ireland.

The policy and implementation of stakeholder voice in SSE in Ireland

The current SSE process was introduced to Irish primary and post-primary schools in 2012, and according to the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020* (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2016b), the SSE process involves school management and teachers under the direction of the Board of Management and in consultation with parents and students. The SSE cycle involves a process of deciding the focus, gathering evidence, analysing data, and writing an SSE report and improvement plan. Actions are implemented over a 1- to 3-year timeframe and the action plan is monitored at intervals. The evidence that is analysed may include data on student outcomes (including state examination results) and experience in the school; data on student, teacher and parent perspectives; a review of school policies and school environment; and data from professional collaborative reviews. Apart from any existing data that are already available in the school, further data are gathered through interviews, focus groups, documentary analysis, questionnaires and observation.

While parents and students are consulted, they are not generally involved in any decision making, target setting or action planning aspects of the process. The full SSE report and improvement plan is only shared within the school to staff and management. A summary report is, however, provided to the whole-school community.

In terms of SSE, the guidelines for post-primary schools issued by the DES (2016b, p. 7) are aimed at including a wide range of stakeholders, 'inviting students and parents, to enable their fullest participation'. In the definition of SSE provided by the DES (2016b), it is stated that SSE is undertaken 'in consultation with parents and students' (p. 10).

This trend towards increasing stakeholder involvement is also reflected in the school inspection process. The DES' inspection guidelines for post-primary schools was developed in consultation with the 'education partners' and states that

> The Inspectorate acknowledges that students and their parents are key stakeholders in the school community. Their participation in school inspections, where appropriate, is a necessary component of a valid, authentic school evaluation process. It enhances the quality of the evaluation and the recommendations for school improvement that emerge. Listening to the voice of students and parents, and their opinions on the performance and operation of schools, is an important and integral part of the work of the Inspectorate in schools. (DES, 2016a, p. 5)

Students and parents are required to be involved in the inspection process in the following ways:

- Questionnaires are issued to a sample of students and parents as a part of some of the inspection models.
- Meetings take place between inspectors and representatives of the parent body during whole-school evaluations.
- During classroom visits, inspectors may also interact with students and review samples of their work.

Therefore, at an official policy level, an enhanced role for parental and student voice is considered desirable. However, it is clear that it is very much up to schools how they consult with parents and

students in terms of the numbers involved, methods used, questions asked and what findings are included in evaluation reports. Schools in Ireland do not have access to the support of a 'critical friend' who might ensure that stakeholder views are 'voiced and considered' (O'Brien et al., 2014, p. 176).

The limited recent research to date on the application of school evaluation policy would suggest that students and parents are, in fact, being consulted during SSEs considerably more so than would have been the case in the past and that school leaders and teachers have not raised significant concerns about this development. In a study of self-evaluation in post-primary schools, O'Brien et al. (2019) found that the data most frequently gathered were surveys of teachers' attitudes and practice, surveys of students' and parents' attitudes, entrance examination results, and results of state examinations. In relation to students and parents, comments from one school captured the generally positive response of heads and teachers:

> So we got the different perspectives of the different people including the staff, the students and the parents and it really gave us a complete picture so we could see then very clearly where we wanted to go. When you pool all that information together, it's just much easier to see the full picture. (O'Brien et al., 2019, p. 9)

In the study, schools reported asking both parents and students about their opinion of school-wide issues including literacy and numeracy provision, teaching and learning and discipline. Students were asked about their attitude to reading and maths and parents were asked about their perception of the support provided by the school for literacy and numeracy. The data from students were frequently used to provide baseline data for target setting and frequently targets were expressed in terms of changes in students' behaviour, attitudes or performance. This reflects the DES (2016b) guidelines for SSE, which recommends that improvement targets should focus on improving outcomes for learners.

The findings from O'Brien et al. (2019) are generally reflected in school documentation examined by the present authors in an analysis of a sample of 20 post-primary school websites from across Ireland. In a majority of cases, the inclusion of parent and student voice is a common theme in both the rhetoric and, it seems, the reality of schools. Evidence of staff attitudes to student and parent voice as well as evidence of including student and parent voice was explored in the following range of documents from each website: Principal's address, SSE reports, the parents' association documents, reports from the Students' Council, school policy documents and school newsletters.

The Principal's address often appears to reflect the values of the school and therefore reference to the importance of student and/or parent voice here would suggest the recognition of both within the overall culture of the school. Evidence of student and parent voice as part of the SSE documentation and school policies suggests that consultation with one or both stakeholder groups has actually occurred. Table 2 outlines the overall findings from this analysis. The schools included in the study are labelled A-T and in each case a ✓ indicates if evidence of parent and/or student voice was found and NF refers to websites where such evidence was not found. While such an analysis provides a useful indication of involvement, a limitation of this approach is that schools may not necessarily document the process of engagement in each case.

The picture that emerges is a rather mixed one. As the categories above, SSE, values/vision and policy development are designed, theoretically, to be closely interdependent, one might expect greater consistency of stakeholder involvement across the three areas. However, as official policy has only relatively recently begun to demand stakeholder involvement in these processes, the extent to which this has become part of the landscape in many schools is notable. Also noticeable are the very positive statements about stakeholder engagement on the websites of those schools which have embraced the concept.

Table 2. Evidence of student and parent voice across 20 post-primary schools using documentary analysis of school websites.

School	School values/vision		School self-evaluation process		School policy development	
	Importance of student voice	Importance of parent voice	Inclusion of student voice	Inclusion of parent voice	Inclusion of student voice	Inclusion of parent voice
A	✓	NF	✓	✓	NF	✓
B	✓	✓	NF	NF	✓	✓
C	✓	✓	✓	✓	NF	NF
D	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF
E	✓	✓	✓	✓	NF	✓
F	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF
G	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF
H	✓	✓	✓	✓	NF	NF
I	✓	✓	✓	NF	NF	NF
J	NF	✓	✓	✓	NF	✓
K	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L	NF	NF	✓	✓	NF	NF
M	✓	NF	✓	NF	NF	NF
N	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF
O	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	✓
P	✓	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF
Q	✓	✓	✓	✓	NF	✓
R	✓	✓	✓	✓	NF	NF
S	NF	NF	✓	✓	✓	✓
T	✓	✓	✓	✓	NF	✓
Totals	12	10	13	11	3	9

The following quotes from the analysed websites provide examples of where the inclusion of student and parent voice is clearly an underpinning principle to the operation of the schools involved:

> Our students are encouraged to actively partake in the leadership of our school through their participation on Student Council, Senior Mentor and Senior Prefect programmes. The role of our student leaders is to represent the views, concerns and aspirations of the student body, working in partnership with school management, staff and parents for the benefit of the school and the student body. This ensures that our school is student orientated and adapts to the ever-changing needs of the students. Parental involvement in all aspects of our development is an essential and appreciated part of our school. Parents are represented on the Board of Management and there is an active Parents' Association. (Principal School C)

School B has a documented parental involvement policy on its website which focuses mainly on the involvement of parents in supporting their child's learning rather than in decision making or management aspects:

> It is the aim to encourage parents to become more actively involved in the learning of their children. The goal is to help improve the academic and social performance of the students by enlisting the help of the parents. (Parental Involvement Policy School B)

A very different approach was found in School E where it appeared that students and parents were central to decision making processes:

> In developing our vision, we engaged with staff, student and parent members of the Board of Management in identifying our needs and priorities for the school. (Principal School E)

Similar findings came from School K and Q where the Principals stated,

> Student and parent voice are central to the running of the school. We consistently consult students and parents in policy development and involve students and parents in the evaluation of various aspects of our school through school self-evaluation. (Principal School K)

> In addition to supporting their own child, parents/guardians are encouraged to become involved in the life of the school through the parents' association, self-evaluation activities, policy development work, and extra-curricular activities. (Principal School Q)

In some schools, student voice appeared to be promoted with little or no reference to parent voice:

> Pupil voice is a student council which represents the student body. Two students represent each year group and provide a voice for that year group about key issues that affect them. Every Thursday, each representative brings their ideas, issues and questions to the table with the main goal of making the school a better place. (Website School P)

Many, but not all schools shared SSE Reports and School Improvement Plans on school websites. The SSE Reports, in particular, documented which stakeholders were consulted as part of the school's SSE process. Where SSE Reports were available, it was very clear if parents and students were consulted as the findings of surveys carried out with students and parents were included in SSE Reports. This is evident in numerous SSE Reports as follows:

> 73% of students feel they have a good relationship with their teachers and 64% feel they can ask their teachers when they need help.
>
> 64% of parents feel their child is extremely engaged, 36% felt their daughters were somewhat engaged. No parent ticked the category 'not at all engaged'.
>
> (SSE Report School E)

> 70% of parents agreed, while 27% were unsure if their child's voice was being heard. (SSE Report School H)

> 87% of students said they had been taught how to work with other students in a group. 83% said they have opportunities to work in a group on a regular basis. (SSE Report School L)

Overall, this analysis of a sample of 20 post-primary school websites shows a great deal of inconsistency in the inclusion of student and parent voice across the schools involved. As a general trend, approximately half of schools referred to the importance of student and parent voice as a value or guiding principle. A slightly higher percentage of schools involved parents and students in SSE processes but even where this occurred, fewer schools involved parents in policy development and very few schools involved students in policy development. While this analysis may provide some indication of the reality of student and parent voice in schools, it is likely that some of the schools may not have included information on all such processes. In addition, it is difficult to know the level and impact of such involvement in each of the schools concerned.

Perhaps, not surprisingly as websites are the public face of schools, the attitudes displayed to greater stakeholder involvement are very positive. However, some other recent research in Ireland appears to confirm that, so far, little of the concern about greater roles for parents and students reported in the literature reviewed above has emerged in the Irish context. In a study by Young et al. (2018), Irish school leaders and teachers were very positive about involving students in consultation about curriculum content and goals. Data from students were used by schools to provide a baseline for target setting, and frequently targets were expressed in terms of changes in students' behaviour, attitudes or performance. As stated by one school Principal

> the student would have come in with their target setting sheet of what they want to achieve, and then the student would have been asked to conduct a little piece of self-evaluation themselves and plan out with teachers what they needed to do to achieve their desired grade. (p. 12)

Similarly, in doctoral research conducted in two Irish post-primary schools by Harvey (2015), it was reported that both the teachers and leaders were open to the idea of student and parent involvement in the SSE process. This is something, Harvey suggests, that would have been unthinkable in Irish schools in previous years. The following comment made by a teacher in Harvey's (2015) research is reflective of how stakeholder voice in SSE is coming to be accepted by teachers in Ireland, provided it is perceived to be for the purpose of improvement as opposed to accountability:

> I do think that it is important to get parents and pupils input into SSE because really if you look at the fact that we're selling the product of their education they should evaluate did we sell a good product or not. So I think that it is important but obviously within certain parameters that, you know, you don't want them to be attacking a certain teacher or something like that. (p. 149)

As implied in the above quotation from Harvey, teacher acceptance of greater parental and teacher involvement in higher level decision making in Irish schools is probably contingent on fairly strict limitations. It may be of relevance that stakeholder voice in Ireland has developed in an education system that maintains a light-touch and low-stakes system of accountability. One can speculate that in a more threatening accountability environment the response might not be so positive.

Conclusion

Recent decades have brought a considerable growth in the formal evaluation of schools. External inspection and SSE are now to be found in most education systems and in most of these, the rights and roles of stakeholders, particularly parents and students, are strongly emphasised. It is enshrined in policy that not only do these groups have a right to be consulted about many aspects of school decision making, but that they are central to both the evaluation of the performance of the school and key actors in planning its future direction.

Of course the level of involvement envisaged varies a great deal from system to system but in the case described in this article, Ireland, policy has moved, in terms of Harts (1992) ladder of participation, from 'non-participation' to 'participation'. Moreover, research to date, including a review of school websites conducted for this research, indicates that a majority of schools are making considerable efforts to involve students and parents in SSE and school development planning.

In some jurisdictions, this degree of power-sharing with stakeholders has engendered a fairly extensive sceptical literature about these developments as perceived from the perspective of school leaders and teachers. This scepticism applies to many of the roles envisaged for parent and student

voice but, not surprisingly, particularly to evaluations which offer these groups a powerful say in making judgements on the performance of the school, its' management and its' teachers. The hostility to this type of potentially threatening scrutiny emerges very strongly in research literature reported from England and Israel, for example. In contrast, however, a more positive view is evidenced in research, admittedly limited, emerging from Ireland. In summary, it might be argued that when looking at how stakeholder voice is operationalised and received, it is important to consider context. School evaluation regimes which take a high-stakes approach may lead to hostility and negativity towards parent and student voice while those perceived by school leaders and teachers as less threatening and intrusive may be more comfortably accepted.

The introduction of SSE in 2012 to Irish schools provided a legislative and structural mechanism for the enhanced development of student and parent voice in Irish schools. This has resulted in an increase in the rhetoric if not the reality of student and parent participation in Irish schools. Furthermore, it would appear that there is no great resistance among school staff to such developments. This may be explained as follows:

- Consultation with parents and students within the SSE process focuses on whole-school practices (e.g., literacy, numeracy, assessment, teaching and attendance) rather than the evaluation of individual teachers or school leadership.
- SSE is a controlled and structured consultation process where school staff decide on the focus of the evaluation, what questions to ask, what feedback from parents and students is included in SSE reports and what aspects of the evaluation report is shared with the school community. Feedback from parents and students is therefore seen as useful when the school set the agenda.
- The quantity of data gathered from students and parents is relatively small, reflecting the relatively small amount of data generally required in order to conduct an SSE process.
- There is little or no evidence from our research that parents or students are involved in the decision making or action planning stages of SSE.
- There are no negative consequences for school staff as a result of engaging in SSE, regardless of what feedback they receive from parents or students. SSE is seen more as an improvement rather than an accountability mechanism.

In terms of Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, the research finds that student and parent participation in SSE is at Level 5 on the framework as they are consulted and informed.

Unsurprisingly, there is little evidence that parent and student participation in SSE would prove a threat to teachers or school management. Parents and students may indeed have a more threatening and divisive voice on issues related more specifically to individual student and/or parent experiences with the school but SSE is generally not the process for dealing with such matters. The main issue regarding engagement with SSE for teachers with SSE is the additional workload, lack of allocated roles within the schools for SSE and the too-general nature of the training and resources provided (O'Brien et al., 2019). Therefore, while schools in Ireland may be experiencing some challenges in relation to the implementation of SSE, opposition to the inclusion of parent and student voice had not been highlighted as a concern.

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