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Researching how student voice plays out in relation to classroom practice in Irish post-primary schools: a heuristic device

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This paper makes a novel and important contribution to scholarship by developing and presenting a set of concepts and questions for those researching student voice in Ireland to consider and explore in their studies, and specifically in relation to classroom practice at post-primary level. Here, a distinction is drawn between consultations that take place inside classrooms between students and teachers and consultations that take place between management and students and cognisance is paid to school patronage, school socio-economic context, and the career stage of teachers and positions in the school hierarchy. This paper ultimately offers a heuristic device as a starting point for future research on student voice in Irish post-primary schools and sets out to bring about more critical thinking regarding how student voice plays out vis-à-vis classroom practice.

Keywords: Student voice; Ireland; school patronage; socio-economic context; Catholic Church; DEIS

Introduction

Discourses advocating student voice have grown considerably in Ireland in recent years. However, little is known about the use of student voice in relation to classroom practice in Irish post-primary schools while the significance of contextual factors is often overlooked. This paper helps advance the study of student voice by developing and presenting a heuristic device (Braun et al. 2011; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Maguire, Ball, and Braun 2013) that in the first instance aids the ongoing work of the current authors, but that will subsequently be of use to others researching student voice in Irish post-primary schools too in that it will stimulate interest and encourage investigation and questioning (Braun et al. 2011; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). This work is particularly timely and topical in that student voice has become prevalent in official discourse in Irish education . While student councils in Ireland have not tended to focus on teaching and learning matters (Keogh and Whyte 2005; Smyth 2016; McCormack, O'Flaherty, and Liddy 2021), students are now regarded as key stakeholders in school self-evaluation (SSE), the internal form of school review

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that is now the main form of school evaluation in Ireland. Thus, there is now a wider concept of student voice in Irish schools and student voice is, for the first time, located in the context of classroom practice (Fleming 2013). While it would appear that consultations with students continue to be dominated by non-academic issues (Browns et al. 2020a), a bill that would require every school to publish and operate a charter for students and parents is currently before parliament and can be expected to further increase student voice in relation to classroom practice. A non-dated Department of Education Skills (n.d., 14) briefing note states that the focus of the charter 'will be on identifying improvements or changes needed to enhance the learning of the students, and their general experience in the school' which can 'inform school self-evaluation and future planning'. It is also stated that 'classroom level practices that can enable student feedback to be integrated into day-to-day classroom activity will be identified' (Department of Education and Skills n.d., 14).

Despite recent developments, there is a lack of research exploring the use of student voice in relation to classroom practice in Irish post-primary schools. This paper, however, begins to address this lacuna and provides a starting point for future research. It raises questions and sets out to provoke more critical thinking regarding how student voice plays out in Irish post-primary schools vis-à-vis classroom practice. In doing so, it draws a distinction between consultations that take place inside classrooms between students and teachers and consultations that take place between management and students, and it is not only mindful of the different actors inside schools but of the need for more research that looks at how SSE and its features such as student voice play out in different types of schools, including schools serving disadvantaged areas (Skerritt et al. 2021). Thus, cognisance is paid to school patronage, school socio-economic context, and the career stage of teachers as well as positions in the school hierarchy. This paper highlights the importance of context and considers how student voice could possibly fare differently in different schools in different settings and be experienced differently by different people.

The following section of the paper sets out our understanding of student voice and what we refer to as 'classroom-level consultations' and 'management-level consultations'. Then, Ireland's complex school system is outlined, enabling readers to distinguish between and understand the different contexts. Drawn from the international literature, two theories that inform our thinking, namely that different schools 'do' policies in different ways and that student voice can be experienced by teachers as a form of surveillance are introduced and then discussed in light of the literature in Ireland. Finally, we close with a discussion of our heuristic device and the need for empirical studies sensitive to context to follow.

Voice and consultations

'Voice' can be understood as a right to, inter alia, express opinions, influence decisions and participate in deliberations (Thomson 2011), or consultations. What is referred to as 'student voice' is a student-centred democratic approach to education (Enright and O'Sullivan 2013). Although it can often be rhetorical and tokenistic in practice, in theory, student voice challenges traditional images of youth and involves schools facilitating students as genuine decisionmakers in their learning (Enright and O'Sullivan 2010). Czerniawski (2012) sees it as both the formal and the informal ways that students are consulted on their education and the commitment to then act on

these consultations and transform education for the better. According to Graham et al. (2019), however, the current lack of conceptual clarity and particularly the frequent use of terms such as 'consultation' is a source of ambiguity. In this paper, 'consultation' refers to students having opportunities to give their views on matters that affect them in schools such as teaching and learning (Rudduck 2006). While some would say that 'consultation' involves teachers making use of students' ideas, Rondinella, Segre, and Zola (2017, 977) emphasise that 'it is important to take into account the difference between consultative and deliberative processes'. Although space constraints do not enable a thorough discussion here, consultations involve power holders taking stakeholders' views into account as much as possible, if at all, while deliberations are more about converging through dialogue, argumentative exchanges, and common decisions (Rondinella, Segre, and Zola 2017). In terms of student voice in relation to classroom practice, the term consultation is perhaps more apt than deliberation in that very often there is a one-way flow of communication whereby school staff use their discretion or data is gathered from students for monitoring purposes.

We distinguish between two forms of student voice used in relation to classroom practice and due to their largely top-down nature, the likelihood of certain voices being privileged, and the improbability of students' views consistently being taken on board and utilised, we classify these as consultations as opposed to deliberations. The first, what we call 'classroom-level consultations', is where teachers liaise with their students about classroom practice. Here, student voice can be initiated by teachers, with student feedback invited on specific practices (Mayes, Black, and Finneran 2021). Examples of classroom-level consultations include teachers issuing their students with feedback sheets or discussing teaching and learning matters with them orally. The key point here is that this form of consultation on classroom practice occurs at the classroom level with classroom-level actors and without the involvement of management. On the other hand, 'management-level consultations', the second practice, involve school leaders either gathering data from students on classroom practice, or having this data collected for them, through questionnaires, interviews, informal conversations and so on. Here, classroom teachers are removed from the process. Both forms of consultation are predominantly instigated by school staff, although they can also be initiated by students.

The organisation of Irish post-primary schools

The Irish school system is rather complex. At post-primary level, Coolahan et al. (2017) describe it as being divided into a hierarchy of different strata: voluntary secondary schools, then community and comprehensive schools, and then the schools in the Education and Training Board (ETB) sector. The schools in the ETB sector were previously known as vocational schools and are now referred to as ETB schools, or in some cases community colleges. Although state aided, the voluntary secondary schools are privately owned and managed, typically by the Catholic Church,[1] while community schools and comprehensive schools are state schools, but the former operate under the joint trusteeship of religious denominations and ETBs and the latter operate under the sole trusteeship of religious denominations (Skerritt and Salokangas 2020), with the Catholic Church usually the denomination in both cases. While some schools in the ETB sector do have religious co-trustees (Liddy,

O'Flaherty, and McCormack 2019), schools in this sector are publicly managed and are therefore 'a distinctive segment of the Irish schooling system' (O'Flaherty, McCormack, et al. 2018, 318). Essentially, the different types of schools can be clustered into three traditions: voluntary secondary schools, ETB schools/community colleges, and community/comprehensive schools (Coolahan 1995).

While just under half of post-primary schools in Ireland are 'Catholic' schools, and Catholicism is waning, on the other hand, Catholicism can also have a wider reach. For example, while ETB schools are publicly managed and were intended to be secular, they are mainly managed by people who belong to the Catholic faith and cater to a predominantly Catholic student population, meaning in many ways they are schools with a Catholic ethos and Catholic practices (Stapleton 2018). Indeed, a recent study by McCormack, O'Flaherty, O'Reilly, et al. (2019, 176) found 'bar a few exceptions, the largely normalised and unquestioned position of Catholic practices within the life of ETB' post-primary schools regardless of whether they had religious co-trustees or not. Furthermore, all comprehensive schools are denominationally managed (Lodge and Lynch 2004) while denominational bodies form part of management structures of community schools (Drudy and Lynch 1993) meaning both are effectively denominational schools (Lynch and Lodge 2002). The Catholic Church, as Stapleton (2018, 11) remarks, has secured a role in most post-primary schools in Ireland, 'having a dominant role in the day to day management of the vast majority of schools'. A significant development in Irish education, however, has been the emergence of 'Educate Together' schools as an alternative to Catholic schooling (Stapleton 2020). Although more common at primary level, multi-denominational Educate Together schools have been in operation at post-primary level since 2014 and there are now 19 of these schools and this number can be expected to continue increasing in the coming years. These schools are classed as voluntary secondary schools, although some can also be joint patrons of or in partnership with other types of schools.

The various kinds of post-primary schools in Ireland can also be identified as serving disadvantaged areas and assigned what is known as 'DEIS' (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) status i.e. DEIS schools are recognised as serving students from deprived areas. Students from non-employed households, from low-income families and from families where primary caregivers have lower levels of education are more likely to attend ETB schools (Williams et al. 2018). Thus, ETB schools are more likely than other school types to have DEIS status (McCormack, O'Flaherty, and Liddy 2020).

Theory 1: different schools 'do' policies in different ways

The first theory is that student voice policies will play out differently in different schools. Some schools will have a specific student voice policy or will have it incorporated into another policy such as a teaching and learning policy, a SSE policy, or an inclusion policy. In some cases these policies will not necessarily be textual and rather than being explicitly documented in written form they can be discursive in that they can be strongly endorsed, implied expectations, or simply encouraged. In other schools, the lack of any policy is the policy – its absence is intentional. The point here is that different schools 'do' policies in different ways depending on, inter alia, their histories, priorities, and student intakes. Thus, it is plausible that how a policy such as one relating to student voice plays out in a school with, for

example, a strong Catholic ethos will differ considerably to how that policy plays out in, say, an Educate Together school. Similarly, how policies play out in schools in disadvantaged settings are likely to differ considerably to how policies play out in schools in more privileged contexts.

The significance of context

Policies are shaped and influenced by school-specific and institutionally determined factors (Braun et al. 2011; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Schools produce their own 'take' on policy, drawing on aspects of their culture or ethos (Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010). They have individual histories, staffing profiles, leadership experiences, and teaching and learning challenges (Maguire, Ball, and Braun 2010; Braun et al. 2011; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012), as well as different local social 'problems' and intakes (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Inter alia, school history, location, intake; external pressures and expectations; and the commitments, values and experiences of school staff all influence how policies play out (Braun et al. 2011; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012).

The significance of external pressures and priorities

Schools often have to prioritise what they do (Maguire, Braun, and Ball 2015). Policies carry with them different imperatives for practice in that some are mandated and statutory while others are merely 'good ideas' that are encouraged and can come to be taken less seriously by schools (Maguire, Ball, and Braun 2013). Rituals and rites of passages such as the time of year and examination periods can also be influential (Maguire, Braun, and Ball 2015). Thus, some policies can fade into the background and/or become low profile (Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010; Maguire, Braun, and Ball 2015).

The significance of diverse policy actors

Teachers in a given school can be at different points in their careers and have different amounts of accumulated experiences, bringing with them different amounts and kinds of responsibility, aspirations and competences (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Policies come to be interpreted and enacted differently, in part, because of the meanings and commitments that teachers and other staff members hold, as well as their position in the hierarchy and their relative power (Maguire, Ball, and Braun 2010). Compared to school leadership teams responsible for ensuring that schools are compliant with policy requirements, classroom teachers have more day-to-day contact with students and are likely to have more time/space to negotiate, co-generate and conduct policy with students while policies can be enacted differently in different classrooms (Maguire, Braun, and Ball 2015). Particularly for classroom teachers, enactments will be constructed in line with their professional commitments, values, and pedagogical beliefs (Maguire, Braun, and Ball 2015).

Theory 2: student voice can be experienced by teachers as a form of surveillance

While student voice can be beneficial for all involved in teaching and learning, it can be experienced very differently, depending on how it is used and who is using it. If, for

example, school management consult students on classroom practice, any anxieties, fears, and concerns of teachers are likely to heighten. The second theory is that management-level consultations can be experienced by teachers as a form of surveillance, although some actors will feel this more intensely than others. For example, it is plausible that someone in a middle leadership position will be more positively disposed to management-level consultations than a classroom teacher, and perhaps classroom teachers will have diverging experiences depending on their level of experience.

How teachers can experience consultations on classroom practice differently to senior leaders

Morgan's (2011) research in England highlights how commitment to student consultation at the whole-school level does not necessarily translate into teachers' classroom practices and how this consultation can be marginal and low in priority for classroom teachers. The research was conducted in a school where the senior management team 'affirmed a strong commitment to pupil consultation' and talked of it as being 'embedded' in classrooms through the establishment of a whole-school culture that placed importance and value on listening to students (Morgan's 2011, 451). However, it was found that despite these claims, teachers did not seem to view what was happening at the whole-school level as providing a model for classroom practice in any way (Morgan 2011). In practice, student consultations were marginal for most teachers as they had to compete with their many other important and demanding responsibilities, notably curriculum delivery and external examinations (Morgan 2011).

How student voice can be used to monitor teachers

While student voice is often used in the interests of inclusion and with intentions of empowerment (Charteris and Smardon 2019a), discourses that position students as consumers, data sources and resources for quality control can miss the emancipatory potential of voice (Charteris and Smardon 2019b). The work of Page (2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b) in England provides clear illustrations of how student voice can be used as one of many ways of monitoring teachers. Surveillance can be 'elicited by senior leaders in the guise of student voice activities' (Page 2018, p.379) 'couched within notions of student empowerment' (Page 2017b, 1000). A frequent and not so subtle method of doing this is through what are commonly referred to in England as 'learning walks', where school leaders enter classrooms unannounced to observe teaching and learning and chat to students. In New Zealand, Charteris and Smardon (2019a) highlight how student voice work can be used for a variety of purposes in schools but when data is gathered by senior leaders internally it can become well removed from students' contexts and instead become a key tool deployed in quality control, used to support performativity and leverage accountability (Charteris and Smardon 2019a). Indeed, student voice can act as a key mechanism for surveillance in contemporary schools (Skerritt 2020), even unintentionally. Remarks, positive or negative, are inevitably made about teachers when students discuss their learning and by asking students for feedback on their learning, Page (2015) points out that students are implicitly asked for feedback on teacher performance which can be difficult not to be influenced by if there are reports of poor teaching.

How surveillance can affect different teachers differently

Student voice can be emotionally challenging for some teachers (Black and Mayes 2020). Some will be enthusiastic and others will have concerns, and those aware of how student data can be used against them might feel the need to present an 'open' and 'keen' teacher face (Black and Mayes 2020). The significance of diverse policy actors applies here. For example, relative to classroom teachers, middle leaders could be more relaxed about surveillance, including through student voice (Skerritt 2020). Teachers at different career stages and with different beliefs, values and motivations will likely experience and perceive surveillance differently.

Combining theories: consultations on classroom practice in Irish post-primary schools

Drawing on large-scale surveys, researchers have reported that students in Ireland, relative to students elsewhere, perceive themselves to have considerably less input into decision-making in schools (Cosgrove and Gilleece 2012) and that perceived participation decreases as students move from primary to post-primary schools (de Róiste et al. 2012). More recent research, and typically qualitative data, suggeststhat student voice remains rudimentary (Horgan et al. 2017; Forde et al. 2018; McCormack, O'Flaherty, and Liddy 2021; Brown et al. 2020a), although it remains debatable whether or not more senior students have more voice than junior students. SSE arguably represents the most significant and visible policy-driven and mandated advance for the voice of students in pedagogy and in consultation in school decision-making in Ireland to date (Fleming 2013), but it is important to note that while SSE is now mandatory in Irish schools, it remains a low-stakes policy. Therefore, are SSE and student voice, relative to other initiatives, tasks, and pressures, of high priority for everyone? As can be seen in the comments made by some teachers in recent studies, SSE and student voice do not appear to be high on everyone's agenda:

> Teachers wouldn't be thinking all the time about the school self-evaluation process. It wouldn't impinge their, I mean if you're by and large teaching kids you wouldn't automatically be thinking about the school self-evaluation process. It's there in the background and it does happen but it wouldn't be the most immediate thing as you go about your day to day work. (Skerritt et al. 2021, 18)

> There's no way that there's staff members thinking 'how could we involve parents and students?' There would be no way they would be thinking along those lines. (Brown et al. 2020a, 524)

While student voice is now strongly promoted, traditions of students being excluded from decision-making in schools must be overcome in many schools, which is not easy considering 'the resilience of antiquated, hierarchical educational structures and relationships' (Enright et al. 2017, 461). Moreover, the relentless'drive for academic adequacy' reflects the order of priorities (Noddings 2002, 94) in many schools and external pressures such as the overbearing state examinations are likely to curtail student voice work. As Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012), point out, the importance of examination grades can interrupt progressive teaching and learning intentions such as student voice. This could be particularly problematic in Ireland where according to Mc Keon (2020) a long-standing culture of promoting an 'academic' ethos is

integral in schools and particularly in voluntary secondary schools. One barrier to collaborative practice in voluntary secondary schools, for example, according to Moynihan and O'Donovan (2021) is the results-driven culture. In results-driven schools, staff, students, and indeed parents often tend to prioritise examination-oriented teaching which leaves less room for creativity, expression, and voice. To this end, SSE and student voice are likely to be low in priority for many, and especially in schools constructed as and considered 'academic', many of which will be Catholic voluntary secondary schools. In contrast, a great deal of anecdotal evidence in recent years has suggested that student voice is more widely adopted in the newer multi-denominational Educate Together schools and while there is not currently a strong research base on these schools as they are not long in existence, recently published research upholds this view (see Mihut and McCoy 2020).

While student voice is still relatively new and remains underdeveloped in Ireland, different types of schools in different types of settings are likely to accommodate it in different ways, and some will be more advanced than others. How student voice plays out in a denominational voluntary secondary school is likely to differ to how student voice plays out in an ETB school, and in other voluntary secondary schools such as Educate Together schools. These differences are likely compounded further depending on schools' socio-economic contexts. History, patronage, social intakes, staff bodies, and external pressures will all influence how student voice fares in schools:

> what happens inside a school in terms of how policies are interpreted and enacted will be mediated by institutional factors … Enactments will also depend to some extent on the degree to which particular policies will 'fit' or can be fitted within the existing ethos and culture of the school or can change ethos and culture. (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 10)

While SSE is at present officially focused more on improvement than accountability, student voice does present, even unintentionally, opportunities for the monitoring of teacher performance. It would perhaps be naive to not consider that this is now occurring in schools, and there are signs that this is taking place (see Skerritt et al. 2021). The arrival of the Student and Parent Charter Bill could possibly give rise to increased surveillance. Given that this development 'reflects the Government's commitment to introduce a stronger complaints procedure and charter as it includes a requirement for schools to follow standardised procedures in dealing with grievances of students and their parents' (www.education.ie), it is plausible that the threatening nature of both student and parent voice (Brown et al. 2020b) will be augmented in Irish schools. Ultimately, the charters schools operate 'will give a statutory underpinning to the role of parents and students not only in relation to the aspects of school life covered by SSE in a school at any one time, but on any matter of interest and concern to students and parents at any time' (Department of Education and Skills n.d., 8). Given the lack of a strong tradition of student voice in Ireland, coupled with recent developments, it is likely that management-level consultations in particular will be viewed by many teachers as form of surveillance. In what follows, we present our thinking through a series of questions posed to readers.

Are classroom-level consultations infrequent?

Survey data examined by de Róiste et al. (2012) indicate that most students are encouraged to express their views in class, but with opportunities decreasing as

students move through the school system. There has been an increase in recent years in research reporting that there is a desire among students in Irish post-primary schools for discussions, opinion sharing, and more of a say in their lessons (Smyth, Banks, and Calvert 2011; Smyth and Banks 2012; Harrison, McNamara, and O'Hara 2020), and while this is happening to an extent, are classroom-level consultations still infrequent? Fleming's (2013) doctoral research shows how uncommon and alien student voice in Irish post-primary classrooms can be, while Harrison et al.'s (2020) case study research in one post-primary school found that most students felt they were 'rarely' involved in decision-making at the classroom level. In the words of one student in Forde et al.'s (2018, 502) research, 'You don't really get a say in the classroom'. Mooney Simmie, Moles, and O'Grady (2019) found some teachers to be in favour of interrupting inherited and hierarchical practices and using student-centred approaches. However, this is not always possible for teachers:

> the concept of a student-centred practice was felt to be at odds with dominant cultural conservative pedagogies as 'students are not used to critiquing teachers or even how to enter into discourse with teachers. They are used to- and indoctrinated into- teacher transmitting information and not questioning it'. The lack of opportunity for students to critically question would appear to greatly influence the prevailing culture of the classroom. Students questioning their teachers appeared to be easily misinterpreted, not seen as providing constructive feedback but rather as a challenge to the persona of the teacher: 'if they do question it, we teachers find it hard to see it as other than a personal criticism' (Mooney Simmie, Moles, and O'Grady 2019, 64)

Recent research exploring the views of second-year students towards their participation in school life in ETBs by McCormack, O'Flaherty, and Liddy (2021) found that while during quantitative data collection students tended to agree that they are encouraged to be actively involved in lessons, the qualitative data presented a discrepancy in that students indicated that this depended on the teacher. The common message was that during lessons, students usually listened, read, or took notes in teacher-centred lessons (McCormack, O'Flaherty, and Liddy 2021). However, there are indications from Mihut and McCoy's (2020) research that student voice 'guides instruction and evaluation' in the classrooms of Educate Together schools and that teaching is 'driven by feedback from peers and students', upholding the building anecdotal evidence in recent years that student voice is considerably more advanced in these multi-denominational schools.

Are management-level consultations becoming more common?

Comments from participants in Harvey's (2015, 151) doctoral research show school leaders welcoming and justifying both student and parent voice on teaching and learning matters through the use of neoliberal language. For example:

> I think to actually ask students for their opinions and ask parents for their opinions on teaching and learning is, again, its new territory for schools, but I think it's about time it happened. Like they are the customers and you are providing the service, so it is a source – it is an untapped source – in a lot of schools.

In other studies, we see principals visiting classrooms in a similar fashion to England's learning walks to informally observe teaching and learning without providing feedback to teachers (O'Donovan 2015) and principals using examination results to

monitor teacher performance and holding discussions with students about their academic targets (Young et al. 2018). In the absence of any dialogue with teachers, such acts could be considered as forms of surveillance. An apt example of surveillance can be seen in Salokangas, Wermke, and Harvey's (2020) research where it was stressed by teachers that control can be exercised in subtle manners in schools. Even if principals do not technically enter classrooms during lessons they can use other methods to form a judgment on a teacher's classroom practice, including using student voice, as this teacher explains:

> management in the school can always ask to observe a class. Now, you can tell them: 'no, you don't want them to', but they can always ask. They can always ask the students and the students will be honest. They can observe through a window, they can listen. (Salokangas, Wermke, and Harvey 2020, 343)

It is not necessarily solely principals undertaking surveillance, however. The current authors have found that some post-holders in Irish post-primary schools engage in policy monitoring and monitor the work of teachers through student voice initiatives such as surveys (see Skerritt et al. 2021).

Are students consulted less in schools with a traditional majority-led (religious) school culture?

Collaboration and input from stakeholders outside management have not traditionally been common features in schools in Ireland and particularly in voluntary secondary schools (O'Donovan 2015). Recent research suggests that while principals might be interested in collaborative practice, willingness often stops at the classroom door:

> The data foregrounds that principals … are positively seeking to re-culture schools and to endeavour to mediate the traditional norms that many teachers are both reluctant and essentially fearful to forsake. (Moynihan and O'Donovan 2021, 15–16)

Students were previously positioned as subordinate figures (Fleming 2013), 'trained to be intellectually acquiescent, especially in relation to social structures and institutions' (Lynch, Grummell, and Devine 2012, 28), and their improved status has dovetailed with the decline of the Catholic Church in Irish society in recent decades. However, with such a large volume of schools in Ireland still aligned with the church, or somewhat influenced by it, could it be the case that the stronger the Catholic ethos is in Irish schools, the less active student voice is? This issue could be further compounded by the academic ethos of many of these schools too.

Investigating the influence of ethos and culture on access to and inclusive practice in mainstream schools in Ireland, Mc Keon (2020) puts forward that traditional structures and attitudes are preserved at post-primary level but that this is more so the case in voluntary secondary schools. Recent research does stress the inclusive nature of ETB schools (see O'Flaherty, Liddy, et al. 2018; Liddy, O'Flaherty, and McCormack 2019) and Mc Keon (2020, 171) concludes:

> some schools, particularly in the secondary school cohort, remain compliant with their long-established ethos and culture, public perception and some stakeholders' views of how far and how quickly inclusive practice should advance.

This is significant because, as Messiou (2019, 769), writing more broadly, explains, student voice and inclusion are interconnected:

> in order to ensure participation of all, schools first need to offer opportunities to their students to express their views and, more importantly, to act on those in some way.

Thus, could it be the case that 'the history of a school is part of what it is in the present' (Lynch and Lodge 2002, 45) for many Catholic secondary schools? It is notable that the new Educate Together secondary schools appear to have strong democratic cultures (Mihut and McCoy 2020). As an outside observer contended to Mihut and McCoy (2020, 44), these schools have been 'early adopters of a level of student democracy not seen in other schools'. Therefore, while student voice might not be too advanced in Irish post-primary schools, with the most significant exception appearing to be the Educate Together schools, could it be the case that students are consulted less in schools with greater Catholic influence?

Are students consulted more in schools with disadvantaged status?

In a seminal study on teacher' beliefs and teaching practices in Ireland, Devine, Fahie, and McGillicuddy (2013) report that teachers in non-DEIS schools were more likely to highly rate reflective practice behaviours and that more activities promoting higher-order skills were found in non-DEIS schools. Elsewhere, Devine and McGillicuddy (2016, 435) state that 'while higher order/meta-cognitive teaching was more evident in our non-DEIS (middle-class) schools', 'Active learning was more evident in DEIS (working-class) schools'. Research by Smyth (2016) also suggests that teachers in working-class schools in Ireland adapt their methods to the profile of the student body and use more active teaching methods. It has also been found via large-scale survey data that students in schools categorised as serving impoverished areas have higher scores on the perceived influence on decision-making at school, with most of the items forming the perceived influence on decision-making focused on aspects of pedagogy (Cosgrove and Gilleece 2012). Thus, are students in DEIS schools consulted on classroom practice more often than students in non-DEIS schools? The high-stakes nature of summative examinations at post-primary level in Ireland is often reported as manipulating teaching and learning and while students studying for their final examinations and particularly those from more privileged backgrounds often develop a preference for curriculum coverage, teaching to the test, examination preparation, and revision 'notes' over time (Smyth, Banks, and Calvert 2011; Smyth and Banks 2012; Smyth 2016), perhaps students in DEIS schools are more concerned with student-centred approaches that allow for more creativity, expression and voice in the classroom. To quote a student in Fleming's (2020, 91) recent research in DEIS schools, 'There is so much more to a person than results in exams'.

Do students in disadvantaged schools focus more on the quality of their relationships with teachers when consulted?

The quality of interactions and relationships between students and their teachers is a very important factor in how students in Ireland perceive their teachers (see, for example, Darmody, Robson, and McMahon 2012; Smyth, Banks, and Calvert

2011; Smyth and Banks 2012; Fleming 2013; Smyth 2016; McCormack, O'Flaherty, and Liddy 2021) and to this end, due attention should be paid to the classroom climate in DEIS schools which can be particularly challenging at times. For example, 'more positive classroom climates were observed' in non-DEIS schools by Devine, Fahie, and McGillicuddy (2013, 95). Smyth (2016, 97) also explains that 'schools with a concentration of working-class students have quite different school climates than other schools, having greater levels of both positive and negative interaction'. While relationships with teachers are important to all students, might it be that relationships are more important to students in DEIS schools? In other words, if discussing classroom practice, are students in disadvantaged schools more likely to emphasise the quality of relationships with their teachers while students in non-disadvantaged schools focus more on teacher performance? Smyth's (2016, 97) research with post-primary school students in Ireland highlights the importance of interactions and relationships in terms of how working-class students view, think of, and talk about their teachers:

> Even when the interviewer asked about other issues, students returned time and again to catalogue incidences of unfair treatment by teachers. This was especially evident in schools with a concentration of working-class students, where many students felt that teachers held low expectations for them and consequently did not treat them with a great deal of respect.

Other studies in Ireland also show how such negative perceptions of teachers can continue into adult life, indicating the emphasis students in disadvantaged schools place on relationships, and the impact relationships have on them. Research with young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds reflecting on their experiences of school shows that those previously involved in a negative cycle of interaction with teachers largely tended to feel that they had been treated unfairly by their teachers, and that they tended to be critical of their teachers and the teaching they received (McCoy and Byrne 2011). Similarly, research with the parents of early-school leavers in an area of disadvantage found that parents emphasised that they and their children, relative to others, had been treated negatively by teachers and school management due to being from this particular area (Doyle and Keane 2019). The view of parents was that their children were experiencing school in the same way as they had done when they themselves were students. A significant remark that 'threaded through most of the interviews' was made by parent who stated that 'kids don't dislike school but dislike teachers' (Doyle and Keane 2019, 77).

Are early career teachers and middle leaders more relaxed about management-level consultations?

Recent research would suggest that some schools in Ireland are now more open to including the views of students in SSE (Harvey 2015; O'Brien et al. 2019; Brown et al. 2020a, 2020b) but it must be considered that this positivity emanates from data largely gathered from school websites and those in leadership positions and on designated SSE teams. While principals might find student voice useful, including in relation to classroom practice, as elsewhere, will different teachers have different views?

Like all schools, Irish schools are made up of teachers who are at different career stages, have a range of characteristics, and are variously motivated (see Skerritt et al. 2021) and recent research indicates that more senior teachers can be fearful of collaborative practice (Moynihan and O'Donovan 2021) while competitive individualism is emerging as a dominant trait of the country's early career teachers (Murray 2021). Not only does strong anecdotal evidence suggest that teachers towards the beginning of their careers are more open to and relaxed about student voice, but it has recently been found that many practising teachers feel that demography and experience play a key role in determining how open staff are to the inclusion of stakeholders such as students and parents in SSE (Brown et al. 2020a). In this regard, could it be the case that relative to more experienced staff and those nearing retirement, early career teachers and middle leaders are more relaxed about management-level consultations?

A heuristic device

Student voice is likely to play out differently in different types of schools and school settings and be experienced and perceived differently by different members of staff. As Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012, 143) explain, 'History, intake and values mediate policy, policy contexts and discourses, as they find expression in the school'. The influence of the Catholic Church, or indeed its lack of influence, the social composition of the students, and teachers' characteristics are all important contextual factors. In this paper, we have introduced the concepts of classroom-level consultations which take place between teachers and students and management-level consultations which take place between management and students without the involvement of teachers, and we have raised a set of contextual questions for researchers to consider and explore in future studies on the use of student voice in relation to classroom practice in Irish post-primary schools:

- Are classroom-level consultations infrequent?
- Are management-level consultations becoming more common?
- Are students consulted less in schools with a traditional majority-led (religious) school culture?
- Are students consulted more in schools with disadvantaged status?
- Do students in disadvantaged schools focus more on the quality of their relationships with teachers when consulted?
- Are early career teachers and middle leaders more relaxed about management-level consultations?

It is important to stress that the heuristic device does not offer definitive accounts of 'how things are' but ways of thinking about 'how things may be' (Ball 2017, 7) and while we might assume that the answer to these questions is a consistent yes, empirical data is needed. Answers to these questions will become clearer upon the collection, analysis, and presentation of this data. As well as aiding the ongoing research of the current authors which will be reported in due course, this device can also be of use to other researchers too. It is envisaged that the presentation of this novel device here will encourage and instigate further studies from a wider range of

researchers and help them to think more critically about student voice, and indeed other issues too.

The whole area of the use of student voice in relation to classroom practice is one that is simply in need of more research, and we call on additional researchers to draw on our heuristic device, build on our anticipated empirical research, and work towards accumulating an extensive body of knowledge to enhance understandings of student voice. Of the utmost importance is paying close attention to context. There is a tendency for research in Ireland to outline that a certain number of 'post-primary' or 'second-level' schools were included in the research but specifying the contexts being studied would help advance our understanding of what happens inside particular schools. It is important that we do not treat, for example, ETB schools and voluntary secondary schools, from the Catholic schools to the Educate Together schools, as homogenous, context-free settings. Regardless of the context being researched, it is advisable that all future research explicitly outlines the research context. Even if this context does not form part of the analysis as such, outlining the school type, socio-economic context and other contextual facets will enable others to make further interpretations of the data.

While the importance of context is highlighted here, it has not been possible to cover all bases and the device is not exhaustive. There is scope for future research to also explore, for example, schools in terms of contextual conditions such as location (e.g. urban, rural, etc.) and the composition of students (e.g. single-sex schools, co-educational schools, etc.) beyond socio-economics. Nonetheless, what has been produced is a significant starting point for research that not only investigates how student voice plays out in relation to classroom practice in Irish post-primary schools but takes heed of context. In this regard,

> Perhaps we can say that what we have is good enough, so far, and that there is plenty here to serve as a basis for further work. (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 18)

Note

1. Over half of Ireland's post-primary schools are voluntary schools. These schools are predominantly denominational with the vast majority being of a Catholic ethos. Less than5% of voluntary schools are multi-denominational Educate Together schools. Voluntary secondary schools have traditionally been viewed as 'academic' schools and today only a minority of them serve deprived areas.

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