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# Student voice and the school hierarchy: the disconnect between senior leaders and teachers

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## ABSTRACT

This paper shows how the commitment of senior leadership teams to student voice is not necessarily shared by teachers. As part of a wider study, this paper presents qualitative data generated through interviews with school staff in one Irish post-primary school with a strong culture of student voice to illustrate the discrepancy that can exist between senior leaders and teachers in terms of how they embrace, enact, and experience student voice. Student voice customs can be rhetorical, perhaps even exaggerated by some, and peripheral to others, and positions on student voice are often determined by positions in the school hierarchy. As student voice remains considerably underdeveloped in Irish post-primary schools despite Irish education and most Irish schools becoming replete with student-centred discourses, this paper provides one possible way of making sense of the current state of play. More broadly, it points to how different actors work on and with student voice in different ways.

## KEYWORDS

Student voice; hierarchy; consultation; enactment; policy actors; Ireland

## Introduction

Student voice has become very topical in recent years (Butler et al., 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Mayes, 2020). According to Graham et al. (2018), there is now a considerable consensus in policy, practice, and research that student participation benefits both students and schools and this is largely coming to be reflected in the stance of the latter. Student voice can involve students sharing their opinions of or addressing school problems (Mitra et al., 2012), which often relate to non-academic issues such as school facilities and uniforms, or it can concern academic matters and classroom practice via what have been coined 'classroom-level consultations' and 'management-level consultations' (Skerritt et al., 2021a). All types of student voice, from students having limited input to substantial leadership, are considerably different to the typical student roles of planning school dances and events (Mitra, 2018).

Student voice is relatively new in the Irish context. Recent studies indicate that student voice is not yet optimal (Brown et al., 2020a; Forde et al., 2018; McCormack et al., 2021) and a key concern of this paper is that, despite signals in the literature

that student voice is being welcomed by school leaders in Ireland (Brown et al., 2020a; Harvey, 2015), this does not often appear to be the case throughout the schools they lead. This paper presents qualitative data generated through interviews with school staff in one Irish post-primary school as part of an Erasmus+ funded project to illustrate the discrepancy that can exist between senior leadership teams (SLTs) and teachers in terms of how they embrace, enact, and experience student voice. As part of this project indications have been found that, although students do not tend to be included in policy development, many schools now promote the importance of student voice and involve students in school self-evaluation (SSE)<sup>1</sup> processes (Brown et al., 2020b) and that principals are more positive towards students' involvement in SSE than teachers are in Irish post-primary schools (Brown et al., 2020a). This paper now builds on this by specifically focusing on the dissonance between SLTs and teachers.

### **The challenges for student voice in schools**

A key challenge for student voice is that some voices are more easily and readily heard than others. Quiet students can be overlooked (Finneran et al., 2021) or might even try to avoid voice activities (Perry-Hazan, 2021) while some students are in a minority, are difficult to understand, or are considered to be difficult (Pearce & Wood, 2019). Thus, what often tends to happen is that the voices of 'good' students who speak a 'sanctioned' school language and who are already best served by existing arrangements are best heard (Keddie, 2015), amplifying the voices of the most audible and privileged and overlooking nuances (Charteris & Smardon, 2019). This can often be the case with formalised structures for student voice such as student councils where elected students 'represent' the student community. There are also power dynamics between students and teachers, and according to Mitra et al. (2012) one of the greatest struggles when developing student voice initiatives is the role of adults in these interactions. As well as being excited and willing, for various reasons teachers can be uncertain, unenthusiastic or even resistant to the principles and practices of student voice (Black & Mayes, 2020). Student voice involves changing fundamental norms, values and practices (Beattie, 2012) and this is something that regularly proves problematic for teachers as there is not only a shift in power to children but concerns about the reliability and validity of students' input. Often students are not deemed to be sensible or mature enough (Glover, 2015; Gunter & Thomson, 2007; Lodge, 2005) and for many teachers, student voice is peripheral or irrelevant, and not something that they believe in or consider to be important (Fielding, 2001). As Rudduck and Fielding (2006) point out, the development of student participation in schools requires teachers being prepared to 'see' young people differently.

Teachers can be reluctant to engage with student voice if they are presented with unrealistic and trivial requests and suggestions, or if students do not take student voice initiatives seriously. Furthermore, student voice can sometimes be understood to mean consulting students on what Lodge (2005) refers to as 'comfort issues' such as lockers, food, uniforms, and toilets. While Leren (2006) makes the point that if the main concern of a student council is with a drinks machine in the school canteen, for example, a lack of

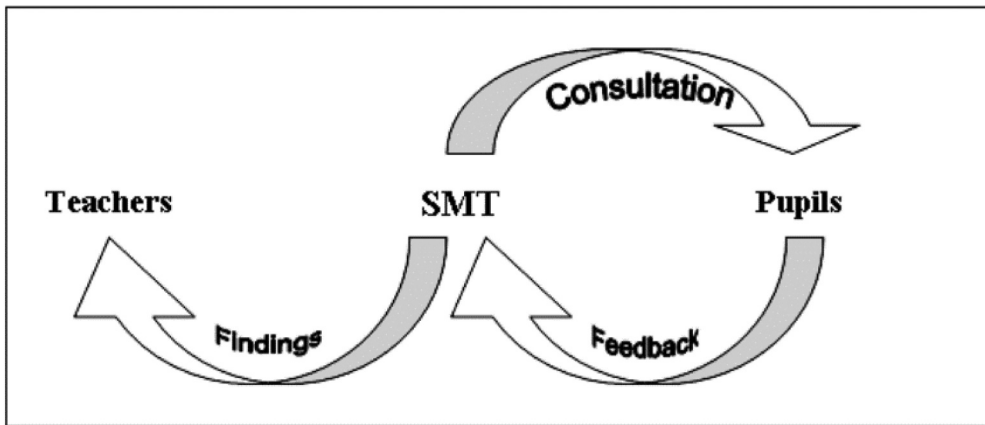
motivation among school management is understandable, it is also important to consider that this can be quite a conundrum for students as they are often confined to focusing on these very issues. Drawing on the work of others, Biddle (2019, pp. 1–2) explains that:

Extracurricular activities and student councils have historically been sites of student leadership development; nevertheless, these activities are often treated as peripheral extras or, in the case of student councils, have been circumscribed to working primarily on social activities such as dances, bake sales and fundraisers (Fielding, 2001; Biddle, 2019).

It is unlikely that all staff in a school will be in favour of increasing the opportunities for students to have a 'voice' (Robinson & Taylor, 2012) and the literature puts forward many reasons why teachers can be opposed to student voice. Lundy (2007, pp. 929–930), for example, explains that adults can be cynical about the capacity of children to meaningfully contribute to decision-making, that they can worry that more power for children will undermine their authority and destabilise the school environment, and there can be a feeling that the effort involved would be better spent on education itself. Time constraints are regularly cited as preventing teachers from engaging in student voice – as Ainscow and Ainscow and Messiou (2018, p. 15) point out, time is 'always a challenge during the busy day of a school' – but other reasons can include the number of students (Lewis & Burman, 2008), resource and space issues, architecture, and timetabling (McIntyre et al., 2005), and concerns about the validity, bias, and reliability of student evaluations (Burr, 2015). While student voice can certainly present challenges for teachers, there are also many examples in the literature of teachers being particularly defensive about it (see for example, Bragg, 2007a; Burr, 2015; Pérez-Expósito, 2015).

### **Position in the school hierarchy and position on student voice**

This research explores how the position a member of school staff holds in the school hierarchy can determine their position on student voice. Ball et al. (2012) have provided a typology of roles and positions through which school staff enact policy and we have recently shown how these roles and positions can explain how SSE is performed in Irish post-primary schools (see Skerritt et al., 2021b). A heuristic device for researching how student voice plays out in relation to classroom practice in Irish post-primary schools has also been developed and presented elsewhere and is cognisant of the significance of diverse policy actors (see Skerritt et al., 2021a). Ball et al. (2012) outline that senior leaders tend to be 'narrators' deciding what must be done, explaining policy to staff, and creating a narrative around their vision; but they can also often be 'transactors' generating, working on and with data; and 'entrepreneurs' advocating, representing, and identifying with certain policies and producing creative and new initiatives. Middle leaders can also often take up these roles and positions. On the other hand, many teachers, and particularly those towards the beginning of their careers, are what Ball et al. (2012) class as 'receivers' who rely on the interpretations of others to guide them and are somewhat protected from policy. There can also be 'critics', often union representatives or activists, who express discomforts or irritations (Ball et al., 2012). People can move between or take up multiple roles simultaneously and some roles will be more prominent in certain schools (Ball et al., 2012) but the positioning of figures of authority such as principals is likely to be considerably different to that of, for example, classroom teachers.



**Figure 1.** Model of student consultation – senior management team (SMT) consults students and relays findings to teachers (Morgan, 2011).

Specifically in terms of student voice, Morgan's (2011) research in England shows how a commitment to student voice at the whole-school level is not necessarily adopted by teachers. Elsewhere, we have reported that our nationwide survey of school principals in Ireland shows that principals support the involvement of students (and parents) in SSE while our qualitative data show that other staff members are somewhat less positive (Brown et al., 2020a). As Harvey's (2015, pp. 181–182) doctoral research also found, school leaders in Ireland tend to be 'more supportive than the teachers to the concept of greater involvement of parents and pupils in the SSE process'. Indeed, despite growing anecdotal evidence suggesting that student voice is becoming more common in Ireland's classrooms, this is not yet supported in the research literature Forde et al., 2018; McCormack et al. 2021; Mooney Simmie et al., 2019. To explain the underdevelopment of student voice in Irish post-primary schools, and the different positions taken by SLTs and teachers, we theorise that student voice is largely taking place through principals and their SLTs with teachers having minimal involvement (see Figure 1). This, Morgan (2011, p. 458) suggests is, in light of the dominant role played by SLTs in student voice work, a 'way of making sense of the low prioritisation of classroom consultation by teachers'.

## Method

SSE is an internal form of school review and in many education systems students and parents are now recognised as key stakeholders in the evaluation process. This research is part of a broader Erasmus+ funded project on the role of students and parents in SSE in four partner countries. This paper focuses on one of the partner countries, Ireland, and specifically on how student voice plays out in Irish post-primary schools. SSE has been compulsory in Ireland since 2012 and is undertaken in consultation with stakeholders such as students. It is advised that schools gather data, quantitative and/or qualitative, from stakeholders such as students 'to ensure that they have sufficient knowledge to make accurate judgements' (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p. 13). While SSE 'can take place in the classroom or school level' it is the latter that is the norm in Ireland

(O'Brien et al., 2020) and although they are not legally required most schools do have student councils which are key mechanisms for formalised student voice at the whole-school level. As noted above, classroom-based student voice does not appear to be common in Irish schools. However, the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill that is currently before the Irish Parliament could be a catalyst for increased voice. The Department of Education and Skills' website ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)) states that the legislation's main aim 'is to improve how schools engage with students and their parents' and that the overall approach is 'to improve the day-to-day experience students and their parents can expect from schools'. A non-dated briefing note posted on the Department's website also stresses the 'close connection' between the Charter and SSE (Department of Education and Skills, n.d., p. 7).

As part of the data collection in Ireland, the current researchers administered a nationwide questionnaire to the principals of Ireland's 723 post-primary schools and followed this up with interviews with school staff, students, and parents in six post-primary schools. In terms of this data, we have already reported that principals in Ireland appear to be more positive towards including stakeholders such as students in SSE than teachers are (Brown et al., 2020a). To illuminate the contrasting positions SLTs and teaching staff take up, this paper focuses on the qualitative data collected in one Irish post-primary school, herein referred to as Highfield Vocational School, to answer four key questions:

- (1) How open do staff members feel the school is to student voice?
- (2) How do staff members consider student voice to take place in the school?
- (3) How do staff members feel about student voice in the school?
- (4) How do the views of the school's SLT compare to the other staff members' views?

Interviews were conducted with nine staff members, eight students, and five parents in Highfield Vocational School. Given the basis of this paper, however, we draw on the data collected from the nine staff members: the principal, three deputy principals,<sup>2</sup> one middle leader, and four classroom teachers.<sup>3</sup> Three staff members (i.e. the principal, one of the deputy principals, and the middle leader) were interviewed individually while two of the deputies were interviewed together as a pair, and all four classroom teachers were interviewed together as a group.<sup>4</sup> Ethical approval was granted by the researchers' institution and informed consent was sought from all interviewees and with their permission each interview was recorded and later transcribed.

### ***Highfield Vocational School***

Highfield Vocational School is a co-educational post-primary school publicly managed by an Education and Training Board in an affluent area. Although Highfield's students come from a variety of backgrounds, they are predominantly middle class, and the school is regarded as high performing. While we could have chosen a range of schools to illustrate how school leaders' strong commitment to student voice at the whole-school level does not necessarily equate to a strong commitment on the part of teachers, we have intentionally chosen Highfield as a case study on the grounds that it is relatively well known in the region for its tradition of student voice. In the past the

school and some of the SLT interviewed received some acclaim and recognition for its student voice work and the current school website depicts a strong commitment to student voice.

It is felt that the interviews conducted in this school are the most apt for highlighting the disconnect that can occur in schools between SLTs and other staff members in that Highfield's SLT continuously emphasised a strong culture of and commitment to student voice in the school but for those outside of the SLT student voice was marginal. Two distinctive experiences also occurred during the collection of data at Highfield that prompted us to use this school, and this school only, for the purpose of this paper. While in most schools, the interviewer was assigned a room in the school for the duration of the visit and often invited to the staffroom during the lunchbreak, in Highfield the hospitality was extended to include a tour of the school premises with one of the deputy principals where many interactions with students took place – this was the only school where such an experience occurred or was offered. Of most note, however, was the interview that took place with a group of Highfield's students, where to the disappointment and frustration of the students, one of the deputy principals sat in earshot of the discussion which consequently produced a very uncomfortable and awkward experience for all involved.

## Findings

### *A culture of student voice*

Highfield Vocational School was said by all staff to be highly student centred. What was very noticeable in the interview transcripts was that most participants specifically referred to the 'culture' of the school, and without the interviewer using such terminology. All participants spoke of how students were able to contribute to school decision-making. For example:

It's an open culture here whereby people can, and I know for a fact, come in, make a suggestion, or come in with a query, and we think 'Do you know what?' and that will end up on the agenda for the senior management team and we'll say 'That's something that we actually do need to suggest'. (Deputy principal 1)

The SLT positioned Highfield as being in an experienced and advanced position with a longstanding culture of student voice. Senior leaders were very clear that student voice was embedded in the fabric of the school. The principal, for example, positioned students as a priority and emphasised the importance of partnership:

They're the most important partners in the school. Your students are partners. They are the most important people in the school.

An important narrative promoted by the SLT was that the culture was congenial, meaning that students' contributions were not always necessarily solicited – the school's culture meant that students were at ease coming to them to exercise their voice:

The culture in the school. There is a culture in this school where they are open to talk, I don't know if you noticed that with the kids? It's very open and transparent and honest. The core values of the school, I'm sure Deputy principal 2 said it to you: honesty, respect, and partnership (anonymised for ethical reasons)— they're the core values. A kid comes in here, they're the ones I focus on. (Principal)

They would be very comfortable coming talking to us if they feel uncomfortable about something or if they have an idea about something, they have a suggestion on how things could be better they do know the channels to go through. (Deputy principal 2)

The picture painted by the SLT was also portrayed by those outside of this team. Significantly, however, classroom teachers were far from enthusiastic in explaining this. For example, in making the following comments participants appeared deflated and disgruntled:

The culture of the school. I'm sure a lot of the teachers here would feel the same. It's encouraged that the parents would be involved and the students would be involved. (Classroom teacher 2)

The student voice is very much heard here ... As soon as you walk into this school it's a student you will see not a staff member. Any time that we are out in the community it's them that are put out there first, not the teachers. (Classroom teacher 4)

The classroom teachers appeared to feel that the school's students were often privileged at the expense of staff, both in practical and symbolic terms.

### ***Student voice in practice***

According to members of Highfield's SLT, students were actively consulted on a wide range of topics, including both academic and non-academic matters. One of the deputy principals listed various examples of consultation:

Gear change in our tracksuit, so they were involved in the designing of that with our supplier. They came back with feedback from their classes on what they wanted ... All policies go through the student council ... they've been involved in changing the canteen. They were complaining about the canteen facilities. They've been involved in enhancing the school environment in many, many ways, and teaching and learning is always on the agenda. (Deputy principal 2)

As 'teaching and learning is always on the agenda' as Deputy principal 2 asserted, various examples of student voice being used in relation to classroom practice were given. The principal, for example, explained how he would arrange meetings with senior students, where teaching and learning would indeed be on the agenda:

Every student will have had a meeting with me before they graduate. In sixth year. Every single one. And they get an evaluation of the school. They actually fill out their own personal evaluation form and they meet me, and they also evaluate themselves, and the contribution they've made, and I do ask them if there was one thing they'd change about the school. And I ask them about teaching and learning and I ask them about their engagement with it, and that's where we get our information.

Similarly, other members of the SLT mentioned discussing teaching and learning matters with students:

Last year we met a group of students and we asked them their experiences of CBAs (Classroom-Based Assessments) and how they found it. Like that, informally we would as well. Often, we chat to students to say 'How are you getting on? How are you finding this year? What works well for you in a class? What do you enjoy in a lesson?' Sometimes we cover lessons and that's a chance to ask them then again. (Deputy principal 1)



In addition, senior leaders also contended that student voice actively took place in classrooms with teachers consulting students on teaching and learning matters:

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

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

Those outside of the SLT also put forward many examples of student voice in the school, but what was clear was that for these staff members student voice was understood in non-academic terms and as existing outside of their classrooms – for them, student voice mainly referred to the 'comfort issues' and other initiatives not directly concerned with teaching and learning:

Students changed the tracksuit. They kept the hoody because they liked it but they had a say in actually changing the tracksuit to something that everyone across the board would prefer to wear so I think they were involved in changing something like that. (Classroom teacher 3)

The journal, for example. Any major initiative, the school would always get input from students. The way the journal was laid out, even the design of the journal. A lot of students complained the journal was falling apart, pages were falling out, so we went and looked at that. We designed a journal that would be more sturdy that would last for the course of the year. Even the uniform—they brought in a hoody. So there is student engagement and they would have a voice. (Middle leader)

In the interview with classroom teachers there was little mention of student voice taking place in classrooms. Only in one instance did a classroom teacher mention student voice in academic terms. The following comment was made by a teacher with 18 years of experience<sup>5</sup> and who is a mentor to newly qualified teachers in the school:

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

While this experienced teacher appeared to be more aware of student-centred discourses, student voice was still portrayed as a distant initiative as opposed to being a key component of teachers' work:

We also have a new thing that's been brought in, well it's not totally new but, Class Captain and Class Deputy Captain, and there's a Class Representative. So, we have a class representative—the representative is new isn't it? But there's a representative from each class, so there's three people I suppose who are the voice for that class when it comes down to meetings of the student council. Now I have never attended one of those meetings but I know Deputy principal 2 would be, one of our deputy principals, (and that students are) given a voice. They really are. (Classroom teacher 4)

Similar to most classroom teachers, the middle leader also gave the impression that student voice was rather peripheral to him. When asked if students were consulted on teaching and learning matters in the school, this participant made an attempt at suggesting students were consulted in classrooms:

Not that I'm aware of. Maybe in an inspection . . . Maybe it's done informally, assessment for learning. (Middle leader)

### ***Views on student voice***

As detailed above, Highfield's SLT presented student voice as a key part of school life. As management they were heavily invested in and committed to student voice, and proudly declared the student voice taking place:

There's an awful lot of activities happen throughout the year: wellbeing week, literacy week, numeracy week. The students are consulted and are asked about what kind of initiatives they'd like to see happen and we act on those. (Deputy principal 1)

Senior leaders generally maintained that school staff were invested in the culture of the school and comfortable with student voice. The principal, however, was somewhat hesitant and acknowledged the possibility of some private discontent among staff:

Staff are open to student voice, they'd have no issue with it. Not that I'd know of anyway. (Principal)

Indeed, there was some basis to the principal's uncertainty. All four classroom teachers were in unanimous agreement and were on the verge of laughter when they were asked if the school was open to listening to students' views. While likely reserved for private conversations, as can be seen in the following remarks, they could at times speak with resentment<sup>6</sup>:

They have enough of a say. (Classroom teacher 3)

Very much, probably a bit too much so at times . . . I think the thing is, seriously in the school, verbally students have enough (\*quietly whispers the word 'enough') voice, in my opinion now, there is a student council, there's a lot going on, we're very much 'What do you think about this?' and it's all changed so much from even when we were in school, and I just think they're so young as well they're not able to manage that properly if they're asked. (Classroom teacher 1)

While senior leaders asserted that student voice referred to the student body and not just the work of the student council, those outside of the SLT felt that although there was a strong discourse of student voice in the school, in reality student voice only applied to sections of students, and namely those on the student council. Thus, student voice was not considered to be meaningful. It was pointed out that it is not possible for schools to be 'listening to every single student' (Classroom teacher 2) and that to do so would 'just

be chaos' (Classroom teacher 3). Moreover, in contradicting the senior leaders' accounts of voice being provided to all students, it was questioned how representative student voice actually was in the school:

The student class representatives—are they really representing the class or are they representing themselves? Sometimes the students putting themselves forward for those roles, and it's great that they are doing that, are doing that with their own agenda and they may not be representative of the wider student body or their classmates they're there to represent. (Middle leader)

You could go up to your student representative and say 'I don't want this, bring it up at the next council meeting' but often the people who are elected are the people who wouldn't say anything so then I suppose it doesn't really work for a lot of students. (Classroom teacher 2)

## Discussion

Our full dataset suggests that principals in Ireland are more positive about the involvement of stakeholders such as students in SSE than their staff members are (Brown et al., 2020a) and the qualitative data presented here highlight how positioning in the school hierarchy can determine how student voice is embraced, enacted, and experienced. We see the influence of 'the meanings and commitments that teachers and other adults in schools hold and bring to bear in their practice, as well as their position in the hierarchy and their relative power' (Maguire et al., 2010, p. 167). Schools are not harmonious learning communities and there can be underlying and difficult tensions and divisions between staff positioned differently in the school hierarchy (Bragg, 2007a) and while all participants were of the view that Highfield had a strong culture of student voice, a considerable gap exists between senior leaders and those outside of the SLT in terms of how they adopt, undergo, and perceive it.

There was very strong support and enthusiasm for student voice among Highfield's senior leaders. Like in Morgan's research, they contended that student voice was active 'in many strands of the school and built on an oral tradition of listening to pupils' (2011, p. 456) and they frequently referred to 'a whole-school culture that placed importance and value on listening to pupils', including in classrooms (p. 451). Senior leaders explained that students were actively consulted on a wide range of matters, including both academic and non-academic issues, but for those outside of the SLT it was felt that, despite a strong discourse, in practice student voice in the school comprised some students, namely those on the student council, having a platform for voice. Thus, the commitment to student voice at the whole-school level was not evident in teachers' classroom practices, and if anything, student voice was marginal and low in priority for them (Morgan, 2011).

In Ball et al.'s (2012) terms, those in Highfield's SLT are very much the 'narrators' and 'transactors' of student voice work, while Deputy principal 2 might also be considered an 'entrepreneur' based on the introduction of the new system of Class Captains and Deputy Captains and how the staff at Highfield often referred to her involvement in the school's student voice work. As with Bragg (2007b, p. 347), we also found that the perspectives of the SLT 'often represented the most consciously articulated or elaborated level of student voice rhetoric'. Given the disconnect between the SLT's depictions and those of the staff

outside of the SLT, we are conscious that transactors can fabricate their policy work (Ball et al., 2012) and as narrators these actors create and 'recount narratives about their schools, how they operate and function, and how they strive for improvement' (Skerritt et al., 2021b, p. 10), and narratives can be rehearsed for research interviews (Ball et al., 2012) to produce particular accounts of school life (Maguire et al., 2013). While a culture has certainly been instilled in the school vis-à-vis student voice, much of the narration work seems to be about enforcing a vision internally and promoting an institutional narrative to the outside world rather than 'harnessing commitment and energy and cultivating enthusiasm' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 51) from within. Both narrators and entrepreneurs generally recruit 'different kinds of support, both moral and practical from teachers, students and others' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 53) but there is little sign of Highfield's SLT garnering support from staff. Even as transactors collecting data from students, the SLT appears to 'operate literally out of sight' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 57) behind the scenes. For those outside of Highfield's SLT, they might be considered 'receivers' in that student voice is somewhat distant to them yet at the same time it can also be oppressive (Ball et al., 2012). The classroom teachers in particular could also often be critical, and resentful, but their grievances appeared to be concealed. Rather than holding any strong influence, 'critics' tend to be 'marginal and muted':

there are plenty of 'murmurings' in our data, that is, 'discomforts' that were expressed ... mundane criticisms that are part of everyday life in almost all organisations. (Ball et al., 2012, p. 61)

While those outside of the SLT 'were in principle not overtly hostile to the concept of pupil voice' (Bragg, 2007a, p. 515), enthusiasm was not evident and while being interviewed, they at times spoke rather negatively. However, 'power dynamics are complex' and it can be very difficult for staff to challenge someone in a position of seniority (Bragg, 2007a, p. 509), and it is therefore unlikely that this negativity surfaces publicly – as the principal had stated, if staff did have an issue with student voice, he would not necessarily be aware of it. Robinson and Taylor (2012) suggest that staff members opposed to student voice or with different views to principals could find themselves 'decisively disempowered', and elaborating further their work highlights the significance of power relations between school staff:

some staff within their schools were sceptical about increasing the level of student voice work in their schools as they were concerned that this may undermine the voice of teachers within the school. The authoritative position of the head teacher ... however, meant that the work would go ahead in schools, regardless of the opinion of those who were sceptical or disapproving of it. (Robinson & Taylor, 2012, p. 38)

Significantly, Highfield's classroom teachers appeared to feel that they were silenced and insignificant. To draw on the words of Black and Mayes (2020, p. 1075), 'it may be teachers themselves whose voices are marginalised as a result of the school's adoption of student voice: an uncomfortable irony'. Thus, it might be more accurate to refer to Highfield's classroom teachers as 'survivors'. As Golding (2017, p. 927) explains, survivors are similar to 'receivers' but instead of trying to 'receive' and then enact, they adopt a minimal adaptation in order to survive without condemnation.

Others have recently reported that the participation of students in school life depends on the approach of the principal and/or individual teachers (Graham et al., 2018) and that principals and other senior staff are crucial in encouraging changes in teachers' mindsets (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018). Bragg (2007a), however, researching the responses of teachers to student voice in a primary school with a tradition of child-centred pedagogy and an overt commitment to the values of listening to children, found that the deputy principal 'was engaged in a delicate balancing act between wanting to lead the process so that it would be successful with pupils ... and wanting to involve teachers' (Bragg, 2007a, p. 510). The deputy principal in Bragg's (2007a, p. 511) study suggested that 'top-down leadership is necessary to promote participation and engagement by children, and that teachers may need to be excluded in order that children are included', and perhaps the teachers at Highfield Vocational School are currently excluded by the SLT for this reason. Notably, Highfield's principal did concede that although student voice is strong in the school, the student voice policy has actually faded due to the absence of key actors specifically responsible for student voice:

I think we've been a little unlucky in terms of our student voice. There is a student voice there, there is a student council there, we do go to them, they are involved, they have their student council seminars and they're given policies to review ... The people that we have had leading it have gone on maternity leave, then another person fell ill, we've had a bad run of it and it doesn't get the impetus it needs.

The current disconnect between the SLT and those outside of this team could perhaps be bridged by a middle leader with a specific responsibility for student voice in the school. Such an actor could serve as a 'translator', planning and producing events, processes and institutional texts for others and making enactments a collective effort (Ball et al., 2012).

## Conclusion

In this paper we have shown how the commitment of SLTs to student voice is not necessarily shared by teachers and how different staff members work on and with student voice in different ways. Student voice customs can be rhetorical, perhaps even exaggerated by some, and peripheral to others. Of course, in some schools there will be certain middle leaders and classroom teachers positively embracing, enacting, and experiencing student voice, and buying into the vision of their SLT but in many cases a significant discrepancy can exist between SLTs and those outside of these teams, and in some ways between middle leaders and classroom teachers too. As student voice remains considerably underdeveloped in Irish post-primary schools despite Irish education and most Irish schools becoming replete with student-centred discourses, we have provided one possible way of understanding what is happening inside Irish schools i.e. SLTs' commitment to student voice at the whole-school level is not producing commitment among teachers, and different people are working on and with student voice in different ways.

We could have used a range or collection of schools to illustrate how the strong commitment of SLTs to student voice at the whole-school level does not necessarily result in a strong commitment among teachers, but we choose one school and one school only, Highfield Vocational School, to encapsulate this due to the school's profile, reputation, and presentation during the data collection. As with many other schools throughout

Ireland, Highfield is undoubtedly doing some positive student voice work but the disconnect between the SLT and the other staff members must not be ignored. The finding that for those outside of the SLT student voice is marginal 'would not have been surprising in other contexts' but is perhaps more 'surprising in this particular school, given the espoused enthusiasm for, and commitment to' student voice by the SLT (Morgan, 2011, p. 455). Given the disconnect between senior leaders and teachers in Highfield, the disconnect in schools where student voice is not as established, and it is likely that there are many, not just in Ireland but globally, is both understandable and unsurprising. Perhaps one way of alleviating this in schools such as Highfield is through assigning someone a specific responsibility for student voice. 'Translators' can bring about more cooperation and collaboration (Ball et al., 2012) and their role is not to be underestimated (Skerritt et al., 2021b).

There is a need for further research to explore how student voice is being picked up and is playing out inside schools, and how it is experienced by the various actors involved in school life. While we have previously studied student (and parent) voice in a larger sample of schools (see Brown et al., 2020a), we have found focusing on one single school here particularly useful as a starting point but moving forward we also encourage the use of 'insider research', perhaps by practising teachers undertaking doctoral studies, to investigate their schools in ways that might not be possible for external researchers (Perryman, 2011). However, as others have drawn attention to (Morgan, 2011; Warwick et al. 2019; Black & Mayes, 2020), there is a tendency for studies on student voice to focus more on the views of students than teachers. As student voice research continues to grow both in Ireland and beyond there is a danger that it will continue to focus heavily on the experiences and perceptions of students but if we are to truly understand how student voice is being embraced, enacted, and experienced in schools, we must also pay close attention to the voices and positions of the different members of staff in schools.

## Notes

1. School self-evaluation (SSE) is an internal form of school review. SSE has been mandatory in Ireland since 2012.
2. The three deputy principals are referred to as Deputy principal 1, Deputy principal 2, and Deputy principal 3. The numbers 1–3 indicate the order in which the data were collected from them. Deputy principal 1 was interviewed first individually, followed by Deputy principal 2 and Deputy principal 3 together as a pair. In their interview, Deputy principal 2 spoke before Deputy principal 3.
3. The four classroom teachers were interviewed together as a group and are numbered 1–4. These numbers reflect the order in which these teachers first spoke in the interview.
4. The interview schedule was devised by the school.
5. While this teacher had 18 years of experience, the other three classroom teachers were relatively inexperienced in that one had four years of experience and the other two both had two years of experience. Notably, student voice appeared to be peripheral and marginal to all four classroom teachers in this school regardless of their levels of experience.
6. It is important to stress that there did not appear to be any resentment on the part of the middle leader. These feelings were exhibited by classroom teachers only.

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