



Planning for me? Planning *with* me. Placing Lundy's Model of Child Participation at the Heart of Individual Education Plans

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a strong focus on the rights of children and young people, particularly in relation to hearing their voices. In this regard, a plethora of international legislative and policy documents have outlined that children and young people have a right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them. From an educational viewpoint, research highlights the positive effect on both students and teachers when learner voice is engaged. Examples include fostering a sense of empowerment and agency in the learner, supporting the learner's leadership potential, and positively impacting student-teacher relationships. Although many international education systems have made significant progress in relation to inclusive education and individualised student planning, a review of the literature shows that student voice is typically under-valued and under-utilised in practice. In light of this, this paper seeks to critically reflect on the importance of giving due weight to student voice when planning for and with students with special or additional needs. In this regard, Laura Lundy's ([1]) Model of Child Participation is positioned as a central framework for guiding this process, with reference to the four key elements of space, voice, audience and influence. Additionally, the author draws on a range of child-friendly strategies for eliciting student voice, with reference to 'Personal Construct Psychology' ([2]). Acknowledging the complexity of eliciting student voice and acting on it meaningfully, the need for careful planning and related training/expertise is emphasised across educational contexts. Ultimately, this paper argues that to ensure all students reach their full potential across both the formal and informal curriculum, all individual education plans and resultant practices require significantly more than a tokenistic nod to child participation.

Keywords: *individual education plans; student voice; voice of the child; Lundy's Model of Participation; Personal Construct Psychology*

1. Introduction

The rights of children and young people have gained prominence over recent years, spanning a range of settings and domains. In particular, the importance of eliciting, listening to and acting on the voices and views of children and young people has featured strongly in a range of legislative and policy documents. Internationally, this rights-based focus is particularly informed by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* ([3]) and the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* ([4]). Embedded in the latter convention, Article 7(3) emphasises how children with disabilities should:

...have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, on an equal basis with other children, and to be provided with disability and age-appropriate assistance to realize that right ([4], p. 7).

In an Irish context, some of the central documents in this domain include the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, 2015–2020* ([5]), *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* ([6]) and *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* ([7]). Overall, the positive correlation between listening to children's voices and their overall development is recognised across the literature. In fact, the DCYA recognise 'listening to and involving children and young people' as one of the key transformational goals in supporting children and young people "...to realise their maximum potential now and in the future" ([6], p. vi).

2. Children's Voices and Education

Focusing explicitly on the educational domain, research highlights the positive effect on both students and teachers when learner voice is engaged. This is particularly emphasised by the Irish *National*



Council for Curriculum and Assessment ([8]), who acknowledge the potential positive impacts of engaging learner voice on student-teacher relationships, on encouraging a sense of empowerment and agency in the learner, and on fostering leadership potential in the learner. This is depicted in Figure 1 below, as sourced from applied research conducted by Flynn ([9]) in the Republic of Ireland.

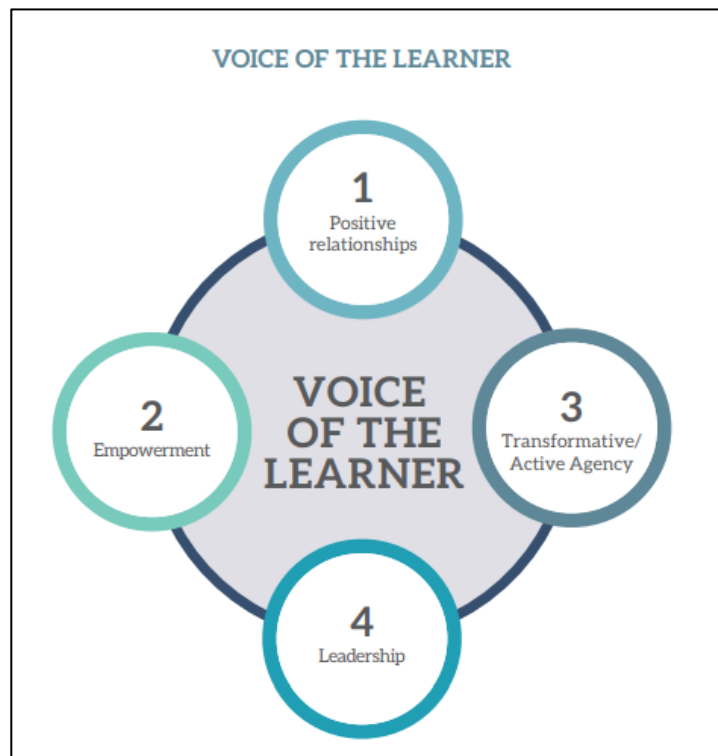


Fig.1. Potential impact of learner voice engagement ([9], as cited in [8], p. 31).

3. Children's Voices and Individual Education Plans

Although the inclusion of pupil voice pertains to all pupils in the educational context, the need to consider those with additional or special educational needs (SEN) requires specific attention. In this regard, research shows that this cohort of students are traditionally associated with exclusion and marginalization ([10]), including in the educational domain. When considering this cohort, the individualised education planning process cannot be overlooked. In fact, Auer, Bellacicco and lanes ([11]) highlight the individual education plan (IEP) as a key tool in educational settings in ensuring necessary supports are provided for students with SEN. Although a collaborative approach to the development of IEPs is emphasised as best practice across the literature (e.g. [12]), the degree to which this translates into practices on the ground is questionable. In particular, research shows that students' participation in the IEP process is often under-valued and under-utilised in practice. Auer et al. ([11]) argue that all too often, pupils with disabilities are not involved in the IEP process, leading to the most serious short-coming of the unheard student voice. Conversely, research shows that in cases where IEP targets were decided by adults, such that the child did not identify with them, pupil disengagement from learning and a lack of willingness to comply with the targets was observed ([13]). In contrast, including pupil participation in the IEP process has been shown to lead to a more positive approach to learning for students, and a positive relationship between student participation in the IEP meeting and academic outcomes ([13], [14]). Building on Flynn's ([9]) concept of empowerment, Griffin ([15]) argues that the inclusion of pupil voice should not be seen as yet another mandate on schools. Rather, she outlines how this process needs to be framed as a significant learning and growth opportunity for the child with disabilities/SEN. Drawing links between *The Empowerment Process Model* ([16]) and the IEP process, Griffin ([15]) views the engagement of learner voice as, "a process that can bestow greater levels of personal control on the child and move him/her towards higher levels of empowerment" (p. 61).



In light of such findings, this paper seeks to critically reflect on the importance of giving due weight to student voice when planning *for* and *with* students with special or additional needs. Laura Lundy's ([1]) *Model of Child Participation* will be positioned as a central framework for guiding this process, with additional reference to Hart's ([17]) *Ladder of Children's Participation* and a range of child-friendly strategies for eliciting student voice from the field of 'Personal Construct Psychology' ([2]). Acknowledging the complexity of eliciting student voice and acting on it meaningfully, the author emphasises the need for careful planning and related training/expertise across educational contexts to ensure that all students reach their full potential in education, with student voice and child participation as central tenets within this process.

4. Lundy's (2007) Model of Child Participation

When considering the position of children's voices in the IEP process, Lundy's ([1]) *Model of Child Participation* cannot be overlooked. This framework highlights the four key elements necessary when supporting children and young people to express their views. These include *space*, *voice*, *audience* and *influence*. Firstly, Lundy ([1]) outlines how children must be given the opportunity and 'space' to express a view by inviting and encouraging their input, rather than adults simply acting as a recipient of views if children happen to provide them. The need for this space to be safe and inclusive is also emphasised, "without fear [for the child] of rebuke or reprisal" ([1], p. 934). Secondly, *voice* is presented, such that children must be facilitated to freely express their views. In accordance with Article 13 of the UN Convention, Lundy ([1]) highlights the importance of allowing children to exercise their right to freedom of expression, such that they can impart information through "any media of the child's choice" ([3], p. 4). Examples include orally, in writing, print, art etc. Thirdly, *audience* is presented, such that the child's view must be listened to and given 'due weight' ([1], [3]). In particular, the importance of active and effective listening is emphasised; not just listening to the child's oral communication but so too, to their non-verbal cues. Fourthly, *influence* is presented, which comprises the final aspect of the model. This step demands that the child's view is acted upon, as appropriate. Lundy ([1]) notes the complexity of this final stage, whereby the Convention outlines how the child's views are only required to be given "due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" ([3], p. 4). Accordingly, Lundy ([1]) encourages adults to interpret the Convention in a child-empowering manner, rather than in a negative or opportunity-restricting manner, by ensuring children's views are given primary consideration in all decisions affecting them.

5. Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) and Children's Voice

Although the strengths of Lundy's ([1]) model are evident, particularly when considering individualised planning for children with additional/SEN, Griffin ([18]) argues that schools require more training and guidance in the process of enacting this model on the ground. In particular, the complexity of eliciting children's voices and acting on them meaningfully cannot be underestimated. In this regard, Sewell ([19]) notes how the involvement of children and young people in their education is often at a tokenistic level. Drawing on Hart's ([17]) *Ladder of Children's Participation*, this tokenistic involvement is contrasted with that of meaningful involvement, comprising child-initiated participation. In contrast to tokenism, Sewell ([19]) argues that when meaningful involvement occurs, voice is deemed to lead to action and be given equal power in the decision-making process.

Given the complexities of enacting Lundy's ([1]) *Model of Child Participation*, and the desire to ensure children's participation is at the upper end of Hart's ([17]) *Ladder of Children's Participation*, the need to draw on other theories and methods for eliciting student voice is warranted. In this regard, Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) presents as particularly useful. Proposed by the American psychologist George Kelly ([2]), PCP is a constructivist psychological theory that attempts to explain and provide some understanding of a person's thinking, feeling and behaviour ([20]). The theory views people as attempting to anticipate their worlds by employing unique, hierarchically organised systems of bipolar personal constructs ([21]). Reflecting on the key tenets of the theory, Sewell ([19], p. 97) argues how PCP offers "an appropriate psychological theory to represent and understand the deep complexity of children's perceptions and views, gleaned from exploring their experiences from their perspective only". The suitability of PCP approaches with children have also been lauded in terms of being non-judgemental and highly engaging ([22], [19]). Following a review of the literature, a number of studies were deduced that employed PCP approaches to elicit children's voices. Examples include Sewell ([19]), Maxwell ([22]), Maxwell ([20]) and Weidberg ([23]). In this regard, the PCP strategies employed



included the repertory grid interview method ([19]), Ravenette's ([24]) 'drawing and its opposite' ([22], [20]), PCP conversation style interviews ([22], [23]) and drawing-based activities ([23]). Most notably, the study conducted by Maxwell ([22]) involved 13 junior aged children on the SEN register of one UK school about their education. Accordingly, this study highlights the suitability of PCP approaches for use with children with additional or SEN, in addition to use with typically-developing children.

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that in all cited studies, the involvement of an Educational Psychologist was highlighted in the data-collection and/or analysis process. Accordingly, the sophisticated nature of this theoretical and methodological approach cannot be underestimated, whereby the need for explicit training and support for schools must be prioritised. Not alone is this training and support required for use of PCP approaches alone, but so too, in terms of the broader matter of eliciting, listening to and acting on the voices and views of children and young people. This is emphasised across the literature where understanding whether, why, and how teachers use student voice can help guide professional development and realise more fully the potential of this promising practice ([25]).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper focused on the rights of children and young people, particularly in relation to hearing their voices. Both international and national (Irish) legislative and policy documents were cited, highlighting children's right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, and the potential positive impact of such practices on overall child development. Additionally, the positive implications of listening to student voices were cited from an educational viewpoint, with particular reference to matters of pupil empowerment. Thereafter, the focus was placed on children with additional or SEN and their position in relation to individual education planning. In particular, the under-representation of children with SEN in this collaborative process was highlighted, alongside the resultant negative implications of same. In light of this, Laura Lundy's ([1]) *Model of Child Participation* was forwarded as a framework for guiding the process of eliciting and acting on student voice, with reference to the four key elements of space, voice, audience and influence. Thereafter, reference was made to Hart's ([17]) *Ladder of Children's Participation* and a range of applied methodologies from the field of PCP ([2]). Nonetheless, the complexity of eliciting student voice and acting on it meaningfully was acknowledged, with due regard for the role of Educational Psychologists and the need for related training for personnel working across educational contexts. Ultimately, this paper argues that to ensure all students reach their full potential across both the formal and informal curriculum, all IEPs and resultant practices require significantly more than a tokenistic nod to children's voices and their participation ([17]).

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