



Improving wellbeing through student participation at school. Phase 2, Qualitative report: views of students, staff and policymakers

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IMPROVING WELLBEING THROUGH STUDENT PARTICIPATION AT SCHOOL

PHASE 2 QUALITATIVE REPORT



Views of students, school staff and policymakers



This report presents the findings from the second phase of a three year Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project (LP140100540) titled, ‘Improving Wellbeing through Student Participation at School’.

The research was led by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University

in partnership with the NSW Department of Education, the Catholic Schools Office (Diocese of Lismore), and the Office of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People.

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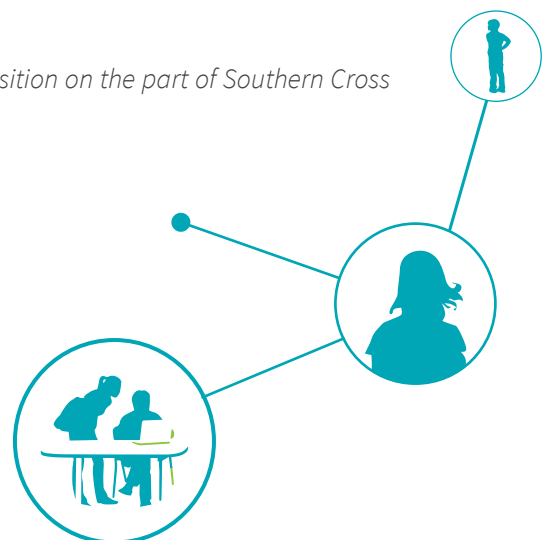
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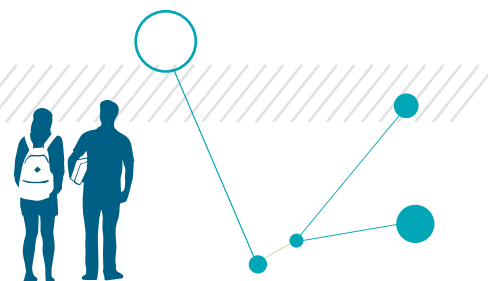


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1. INTRODUCTION



This document reports the findings from Phase 2 of an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded study (LP140100540) entitled, 'Improving wellbeing through student participation at school'. The overall research project aimed to strengthen knowledge, policy and practice concerning student participation in New South Wales (NSW) schools by identifying whether and how such participation improves students' social and emotional wellbeing. It was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1:** How is student participation currently articulated in NSW education policy in Australia?
- RQ2:** How do students, teachers, principals and policymakers understand participation? And how is it currently experienced by students and staff in NSW schools?
- RQ3:** To what extent is participation at school associated with student wellbeing, and which specific elements of participation are core predictors of student wellbeing?
- RQ4:** Do Honneth's modes of recognition mediate the relationship between participation and wellbeing?

The research was undertaken over a 3 year period, covering four research phases, each of which closely aligns with one of the research questions above.

Phase 1:

Detailed policy analysis (RQ1)

This phase involved the critical analysis of local, state and national policies ($n=143$) to understand how student participation is currently articulated in education related policy in NSW.

Phase 2:

Qualitative focus groups with students and interviews with school staff and educational policy makers (RQ2)

A qualitative phase involving interviews with policymakers ($n=9$), and school staff ($n=32$) and focus groups with Year 7-10 students ($n=177$) from across 10 schools to understand how student participation is understood and experienced in NSW schools.

The findings from Phases 1 and 2 were used to identify the key elements of participation to take forward into Phase 3.

Phase 3:

Quantitative online survey development (RQ3)

Phase 3 involved the development of a valid and reliable scale to measure student participation, including its links to student wellbeing. This development phase involved a total of 536 students across two rounds. The development of the scale served two purposes: (a) to measure participation via a large scale online survey in Phase 4 (see below), and (b) to contribute to the development of a tool for schools to help them to measure and monitor student participation in practice.

Phase 4:

Quantitative online survey (RQ 4)

An online survey of Year 7 -10 students in NSW ($n=1435$) was conducted to test the relationship between participation, wellbeing and recognition.

Throughout the study, the research team was guided and assisted by an advisory group comprising 15 members: 4 representatives from the partner organisations (the NSW Department of Education, Lismore Catholic Schools' Office and the Office of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People), 2 school principals, 2 teachers, and 7 students from Years 7-9. The involvement of students in guiding the research is ethically and methodologically significant, as it endeavours to utilise their expertise while reflexively engaging with the strengths and complexities of implementing student participation in a meaningful and authentic way.

This document reports solely on Phase 2, which aimed to establish a grounded understanding of student participation in NSW schools and address RQ2. For the reports pertaining to the other phases of the research, along with short summaries of the results for schools, a Good Practice Guide for expanding participation at school and information on the tool for measuring student participation at your school, please visit: bit.ly/ParticipationStudy



2. BACKGROUND

There is considerable international interest in children and young people's participation. This has expanded over the past 30 years, largely stemming from the distinctive positioning of childhood developed through Childhood Studies (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998), along with the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Correspondingly, in the school context, student participation has been advocated on the basis that (a) it is students' right as citizens, (b) it will improve services to children and young people, (c) it is more democratic and leads to better decisions, (d) it ensures children and young people's safety and protection from abuse, (e) it has been linked to improved academic engagement, and (f) it enhances children and young people's skills, self-esteem and self-efficacy (and by extension their wellbeing) (Hall, 2010; Kuurme & Carlsson, 2010; Mannion, 2010). Indeed, it is now consistently argued that student participation has the potential to transform education, build stronger school communities, engage and motivate students and strengthen student wellbeing (Anderson & Graham, 2016; CET, 2016; Fielding, 2007; Hodgson, 2007; Mannion, Sowerby & l'Anson, 2015; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Sussman, 2015). In relation to wellbeing in particular, Butcher (2010, p. 123) asserts, "Participation is in itself health and well-being promoting. If done well, it can contribute to students feeling valued, confident, energised, and more in control of their lives."

However, student participation challenges a number of entrenched assumptions and long-standing conventions within educational policy, philosophy and practice (Mannion, 2007, 2010; Sanderse, Walker, & Jones, 2015). These centre around social and cultural constructs of childhood and school: the child as a human 'becoming' versus a human 'being'; a future rights-bearing citizen versus current rights-bearing citizen; a passive, incompetent individual versus an active competent individual; as inexperienced, irrational and 'unknowing' compared to adults. As such, while increasing reference is now made to 'participation' and to proxy terms such as 'student voice' in educational policy, structures and guidelines (Mitra & Kirshner, 2012, and see also the Phase 1 policy report), the exact nature of participation depends on who is speaking about what issues and in which context, how voice is heard, and whether it is transformed into 'action' or 'agency' (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Holdsworth, 2000). Hence, participation can often be tokenistic and limited, because adults determine the ways in which young people are heard and if or how their ideas are acted upon (Hart, 1992).

In line with the above tensions, the Phase 1 policy analysis found that despite frequent reference to student participation in policy, there is no policy directive on student participation and no synergy in the current policy landscape surrounding participation, even regarding what participation is. The analysis also found that student representative councils (SRCs), or similarly structured committees, are consistently presented as the primary vehicle for promoting the idea of student voice and enabling student participation in school settings. Such structures offer a form of manageable student participation, one that adults tend to feel most comfortable with (Horgan, Forde, Martin & Parkes, 2017), and there was little regard for the now consistent critique of these structures - issues such as representation, inclusivity, influence and communication (Black, Stokes, Turnbull, & Levy, 2009; Frost & Holden, 2008). Indeed, despite ostensibly offering a vehicle for student participation, SRCs are often viewed as unrepresentative of students' views and potential contributions, and adult-led in their process (Fielding & McGregor, 2005; Hill, Davis, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004; Tisdall, 2009), plus they do not usually extend to wider pedagogical approaches or school ethos more generally (Lundy & Stalford, 2013).

In line with the increasing reference to student participation in Australian educational policy, some other small-scale participation initiatives have been gradually emerging on the ground (for example, *KidsMatter (Primary)*, *MindMatters (Secondary)*, *R U MAD [are you making a difference]*, student leadership programs, 'The Growing Respect' program). A number of schools have also been increasingly trialling more student-centred learning approaches, such as project or problem based learning. These approaches have gained particular attention worldwide for the potential they offer to engage a diverse range of students, reducing school dropout, and supporting students to become adaptable, lifelong learners (Harada, Kirio, & Yamamoto, 2015; Savery, 2006). However, it has become evident that students need to be coached in the skills required to become effective at project or problem based learning (English & Kitsantas, 2013). Perhaps for this reason, the evidence remains somewhat ambivalent regarding how effective these types of participation initiatives are for increasing student engagement in schools (Johnson & Delawsky, 2013). Further, little is known at present about what such approaches offer in terms of students' subjective participatory experience (Collin, 2008).

To date then, in line with the ambiguous policy terrain, experiences of student participation in Australia are likely fairly ad-hoc and inconsistent between schools. However, added impetus for growth in this area has arisen through the

linking of participation and wellbeing in the NSW Department of Education and Communities' Wellbeing Framework for Schools (2015) as well as other national educational reforms, such as the exponential increase in funding accountability and performance requirements (Lingard, 2011). The latter, for instance, has resulted in schools needing to collect evidence (including directly from students) about what assists students with their learning needs and how effective this is. This would seem to strengthen impetus for student participation (to some degree at least), although the demand for visible, statistical results about students and schools can restrict opportunities for students to participate in *meaningful, democratic ways* (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Indeed, there is a lack of evidence in Australia regarding whether and how the most 'successful' (highest ranked) schools are currently involving students, let alone whether this participation is 'done well'.

There are inherently complex issues in attempting to quantify meaningful student participation, particularly when it is not clearly defined, not to mention trying to measure the associated social and emotional outcomes for students. However, researchers insist that measuring these constructs is critical if the likes of student wellbeing is to become a meaningful objective of quality education (Barblett & Malone, 2010; Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011; Coleman, 2009; Kern, Adler, Waters, & White, 2015; Sanderse et al., 2015; White, Connelly, Thompson, & Wilson, 2013). At present, while there is considerable rhetoric linking participation and wellbeing there is very limited evidence regarding which elements of participation lead to improved student social and emotional wellbeing, and to what extent. The exception is work by de Róiste, Kelly, Molcho, Gavin, and Gabhainn (2012) who endeavoured to measure the relationship between student participation and health and wellbeing outcomes in a sample of over 10,000 students aged 10-17 years in Irish schools. Their survey items were limited to three areas of participation - student views on school, participation in school events, and taking part in school rules. Nevertheless, the results demonstrate promising evidence, indicating participation in school was significantly associated with liking school and higher perceived academic performance, better self-rated health, higher life satisfaction and greater reported happiness. The 'Improving wellbeing through student participation at school' research aims to build upon the likes of de Róiste et al.'s (2012) work, to more deeply and thoroughly investigate current perceptions and experiences of student participation, to identify the different elements of participation at school, and how these connect to student wellbeing, with the aim of improving educational policy and practice in these spaces.

DEFINING STUDENT PARTICIPATION FOR THE RESEARCH

As indicated above, while there is growing interest and impetus for student participation, there is little definitional clarity. Student participation can be used to refer to a wide range of actions and experiences, from simply attending school and taking part in lessons and activities through to being more actively engaged in the school community and involved in formal decision-making about school matters (Davies, Williams, Yamashita, & Ko Man-Hing, 2004; Ruddock & Fielding, 2006; Thomas, 2007). Summarising this, Thomson and Holdsworth (2003) have proposed a five level model highlighting the differing ways student participation can be experienced in educational settings:

1. Being physically present at school.
2. Being involved in school and taking part in lessons and activities.
3. Involvement in formal decision-making (consultation, committees).
4. Initiating, decision-making and effecting change in school and beyond (e.g. neighbourhood capacity building).
5. Community social activism (projects on human rights, protests against war).

Children and young people's participation at the decision-making level, through to the activist level (3-5 above), is often referred to as 'student voice' and the two terms, 'participation' and 'voice', are often used interchangeably in practice and research (CET, 2016; Fletcher, 2014; Horgan, et al., 2017; Mitra, 2005; Pearce & Wood, 2016; Sussman, 2015). However, Fletcher (2014) has argued for distinction between 'voice' and 'participation'. He proposes that student voice refers to anything a student expresses in relation to any aspect of learning, schooling or education, whereas he considers student participation as more of a self-determined act, whereby students actively commit to something at school. Lundy (2007) too has argued for a distinction between the two terms, advocating that an emphasis on student 'voice' potentially

limits and diminishes the notion of participation, by, for example, sidelining the ‘influence’ of that voice. She proposes that to uphold the participation afforded to children and young people under Article 12 of the UNCRC, participation should be conceptualised as having 4 dimensions:

- **Space:** Children must be given the opportunity to express their views
- **Voice:** Children must be facilitated to express their views
- **Audience:** Their views must be listened to
- **Influence:** Their views must be acted upon, as appropriate (Lundy, 2007, p. 933).

Inherent in these dimensions is the importance of student participation opportunities that are ‘meaningful’. Hart’s (1992) ladder for children and young people’s participation (developed from Arnstein’s 1969 ladder of citizen participation) has arguably been one of the most influential models for highlighting that participation can take various forms, and that not all of these are likely to be experienced as genuine and meaningful. Hart’s ladder, reproduced in Figure 1, spans from the first rung ‘manipulation,’ in which young people are used to meet adult agendas, to the top rung where opportunities are child-initiated, and decisions are shared with adults (1992). Others have built upon Hart’s ladder, such as Holdsworth (2000) who adapted it specifically to the school context, Shier (2001) who highlighted the responsibilities of organisations (such as schools) towards the participatory process, and Mitra (2006) who created a simplified ‘Pyramid of Student Voice’ (see Figure 2). In fact, a recent count suggests there are now as many as 30 different typologies and models for participation (Karsten, 2012).

Despite some differences in language, most of the models, including Hart’s and Mitra’s (see below), depict a hierarchical continuum of participation. In doing so, they imply that schools are lacking if they are not operating at the ‘top level’. Put another way, this suggests that the ‘top level’ is participation. However, some researchers have posited that students’ experiences of participation and the related sense of empowerment are not necessarily linear (see Fielding, 2001; Kirby, 2004; Treseder, 1997). Fielding (2001) for instance, suggests a greater level of flexibility and movement is required in understanding participation and has proposed a framework for student participation (see an extract in Figure 3) describing how different levels will be utilised at different times and contexts in schools.

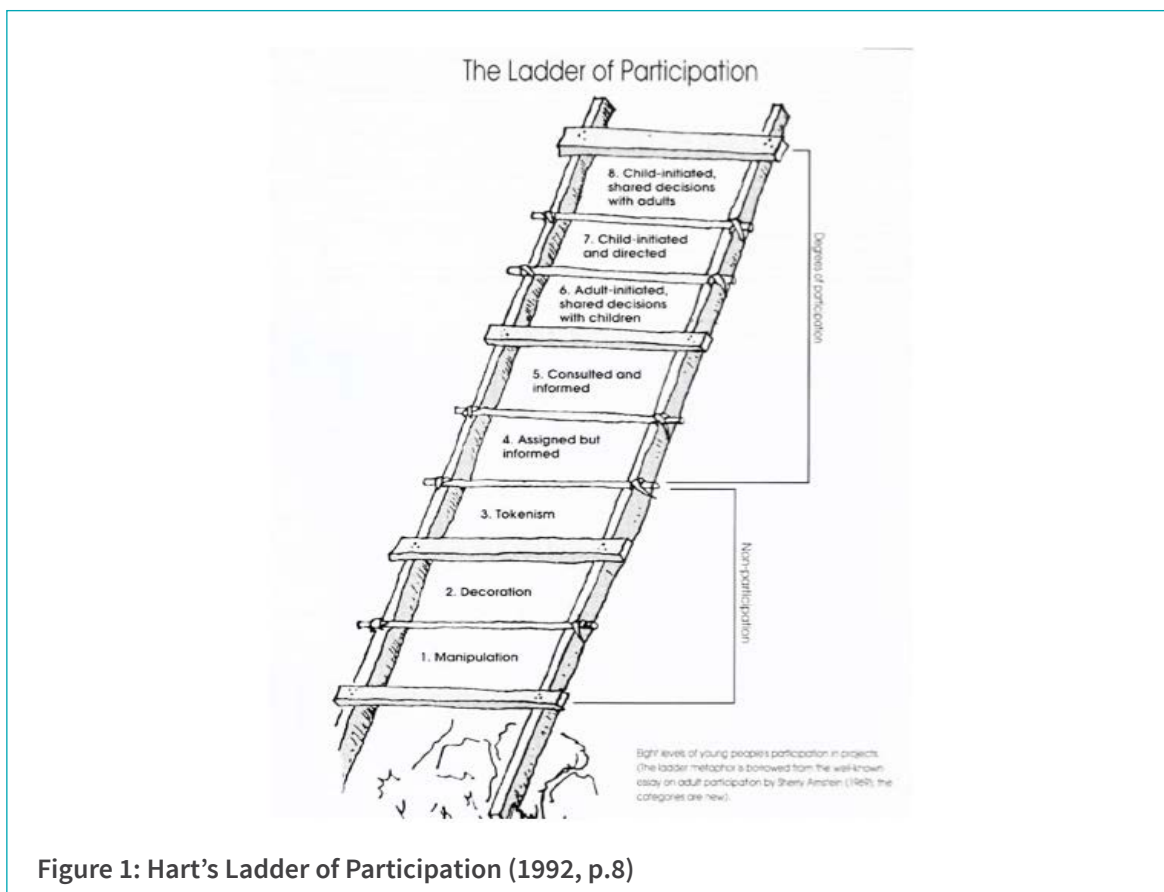


Figure 1: Hart’s Ladder of Participation (1992, p.8)

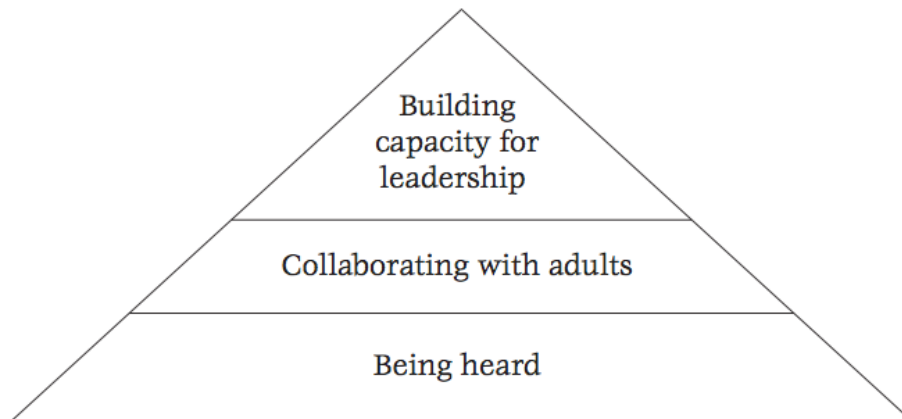


Figure 2: Mitra's Pyramid of Student Voice (2006, p.7)

Levels of student (pupil) involvement in school self review & school improvement

Students as DATA SOURCE	Students as ACTIVE RESPONDENTS	Students as CO- RESEARCHERS	Students as RESEARCHERS
(a) rationale & engagement			
Rationale Teachers need to know about students' prior learning / perceptions of their learning in order to teach effectively	Rationale Teachers need to engage students in order to fully enhance both teaching and learning	Rationale Teachers need to engage students as partners in learning in order to deepen understanding and learning	Rationale Students need to engage with their teachers and peers in order to deepen understanding and learning
What Kind of Knowledge is Used Knowing about student performance and attitudes towards learning	What Kind of Knowledge is Used Knowing how students learn	What Kind of Knowledge is Used Knowing what students might be able to contribute to deepen understanding	What Kind of Knowledge is Used Knowing what teachers and peers might be able to contribute to deepen understanding
How Teachers Engage with Students Acknowledging	How Teachers Engage with Students Hearing	How Teachers Engage with Students Listening in order to learn	How Teachers Engage with Students Listening in order to contribute
Student Role Recipients	Student Role Discussants	Student Role Co-Researchers	Student Role Initiators
How Meaning is Made Dissemination	How Meaning is Made Discussion	How Meaning is Made Dialogue (teacher led)	How Meaning is Made Dialogue (student led)

Figure 3: Extract from Fielding's Conceptualisation of Student Involvement (2001, p.136)

Also, implicit across the different typologies are notions of intergenerational relationships between child participants and adult facilitators. Indeed, it is often argued that ‘higher levels’ of student participation are dependent upon “developing new child/youth-adult relationships: rooted in mutual trust and respect and engaging in child-adult dialogue” (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003, p. 7). Recent research on student participation has come to focus further on the relational, highlighting that being valued and recognised are important aspects of meaningful student participation in schools (Brasof, 2015; Horgan et al., 2017; Mannion, Sowerby, & l’Anson, 2015; Robinson, 2014). In particular, Brasof (2015) describes the ‘relationship behaviours’ in schools that can encourage or discourage student participation or leadership capacity building. The importance of relationship and notions of recognition were also key findings of the ‘Wellbeing in Schools’ ARC (Graham et al., 2014), which was the precursor to the ‘Improving wellbeing through student participation at school’ study.

Given the diverse, layered typologies that seek to explain participation, including the recent emphasis on relationships, it is perhaps not surprising that there is no definitive, shared understanding of what participation at school means, let alone how it might be experienced by students. Addressing this gap is critical, because a lack of understanding around what participation *means* could result in tensions in how participation is practised in schools. The implications of this gap in knowledge have not been insignificant for this study, with the lack of a clear definition of participation creating difficulties in endeavouring to engage schools in the research.

In both Phases 1 and 2 of this research, participation needed to be understood broadly: to mean more than simply *attending* school, and to be wider than just *decision-making*. Our interest is in meaningful student involvement in discussions and/or in shared action at school about matters important for them, including in learning. These matters may be important at an individual or a collective level, and we are seeking to know more about how these interactions are formalised in institutional structures, or how they occur informally through school-based relationships. The work of Phase 2 is particularly significant in furthering understandings of student participation in that it sought to gain a grounded, nuanced understanding of how policymakers, school staff and students conceive of student participation, before attempting to develop a way to measure this and explore its connections to wellbeing in Phases 3 and 4.



3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The ‘Improving wellbeing through student participation at school’ research adopted a four-phase, mixed method approach, which sought to answer four inter-related research questions, as explained in the introduction. This overall design was underpinned a theoretical framework linking Childhood Studies and recognition theory.

3.1 OVERALL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Childhood Studies offers a distinctive way of understanding, researching and theorising children and childhood, which recognises that beliefs about childhood – including what sorts of experiences childhood ought to consist of, how children should behave and be educated – are largely socially constructed (James & James, 2008; Jenks, 2005; Kehily, 2009). Assumptions, beliefs and expectations about how childhood ‘should be’ vary between cultures, individuals, families and social groups. These differing expectations (and contexts) influence the opportunities children are afforded to develop different skills and competencies. Thus, children of the same age can display quite varied capabilities between different cultures, communities or households.

With this in mind, it is evident that childhood is inextricably linked to intergenerational relationships between children and adults in different contexts (Woodhead, 2009). This means childhood is no longer uncritically assumed to be simply a forerunner to adulthood: the field of Childhood Studies, alongside the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) has challenged assumptions that children are merely ‘citizens in waiting’ and instead positioned them as people in their own right, who are involved in dynamic interpersonal relations. In this way, children are understood to have important insights based on their experiences – both personally and in relation to the experience of being a child in contemporary society (including in contemporary schools). Therefore, children are recognised as not only having the *capacity* but also the *right* to participate in matters that affect them. Indeed, in drawing together their various rights - such as to information, to participation, to protection, to guidance from adults, and to education - it can be asserted that they have the *right* to be supported in a way that recognises their evolving understandings, skills and abilities (Lundy, 2007; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). However, despite the near universal ratification of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), there remains a pervasive view in society that prioritises children’s *protection* and vulnerability at the expense of opportunities for them to *participate* (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson, & Fitzgerald, 2013). As such, children in some contexts tend to remain positioned as a vulnerable, powerless, and inferior social group (James et al., 1998), something particularly evident in the teacher-student hierarchies dominant in schools.

In addition to Childhood Studies theory then, is the importance of recognition theory. The work of recognition scholars is grounded in critical theory and is largely concerned with self-actualisation, social inequality and social justice. In this sense, ‘recognition’ is resonant with interests concerning the rights of powerless, minority groups – in this case children and young people. Indeed, inherent in the concept is the notion that achieving recognition requires an element of ‘struggle’ (Honneth, 1995). In addition to the ‘struggle’ for recognition of children and young people as a social group, young people also encounter a ‘struggle’ for self-actualisation (identity formation), as a critical aspect of growing up (Fitzgerald, Graham, Smith, & Taylor, 2010). The process of identity formation is indistinguishably linked to self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, and hence subjective wellbeing. As such, in the earlier ‘Wellbeing in Schools’ ARC, this link was explored and recognition theory was found to offer a useful, alternative framework for conceptualising understandings and practice concerning wellbeing in schools (Thomas, Graham, Powell, & Fitzgerald, 2016). Building from this, recognition theory provides an important analytical tool for understanding the nexus between student participation and student wellbeing in the context of schools.

In this research we draw predominantly on the work of recognition scholar Axel Honneth (1995, 2001, 2004), who has focused mainly on the role and importance of human interaction (relationships) in personal and social recognition. Honneth proposed three domains of inter-subjective recognition: love, rights and solidarity. ‘Love’ refers to emotional concern for the wellbeing and needs of another. ‘Rights’ reflects respect for the other party’s legal status as a person and citizen. ‘Solidarity’ refers to the valuing of an individual’s particular traits and abilities, and the distinctive contribution these bring to a community (Honneth, 1995). In the earlier ‘Wellbeing in Schools’ study (Graham et al., 2014), the

language of these three recognition domains was adapted to be more intelligible in contemporary school settings. Therefore, love, rights and solidarity were represented as ‘cared for’, ‘respected,’ and ‘valued’. This framing has been carried forward into this ‘Improving wellbeing through student participation at school’ research.

Combining the two interests of Childhood Studies and recognition theory offers a powerful lens through which to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which participation is understood and experienced at school, including the elements that potentially contribute positively to wellbeing. Specifically, the use of both theoretical interests allows for:

- The rights, capabilities and agency of young people to be brought to the fore and consideration given to how these are *recognised* at school – by adults, in school processes and through cultural norms
- Exploration of the *nature* of young people’s participation in intergenerational relationships – their status, voice and agency - in this case in adult-child relationships, in school processes and in school cultural norms
- Consideration of whether (or how) greater *recognition* of the rights, capabilities and agency of young people (through increased participation) at school might improve wellbeing

Therefore, Phase 2 unpacks how rights, status and voice are manifest in various practices of student participation at school, but also seeks to understand the ‘so what’ of such practices for student wellbeing.

The method detailed below now focuses specifically on Phase 2, explaining the qualitative research sites and recruitment of participants, the sampling procedures, detailed descriptions of the qualitative data methods employed, and how these were developed in consultation with young people and adults in the project’s advisory group.

3.2 PHASE 2 METHOD

RECRUITMENT

Schools were drawn from a purposive sample with the aim of including a diverse range of government and Catholic schools. Diversity was sought in terms of school size, socioeconomic status, geographic and cultural characteristics, whether schools were single sex or co-educational, and also differing approaches to student participation. Some selected schools were considered ‘lighthouse schools’ for their leadership in the area of student participation. Their involvement was sought as it offered insight into innovative practices and access to perspectives and experiences in relation to these. The various school characteristics were identified via the My Schools website and in consultation with the research partners from the NSW Department of Education and the Catholic Education Office.

The research team initially identified 12 potential schools to invite for participation in the qualitative phase of the study. The principals of these schools were sent an email detailing the purpose and approach of the study (see Appendix A), and inviting their participation. Some schools were unable to participate, often due to being involved in other research projects, and therefore other schools were identified and invited to participate in the study. In the end, sixteen schools were invited and ten accepted. Six were government schools and four were Catholic schools. The ten schools were spread across the following four geographic areas in New South Wales:

- Northern Coast, regional NSW: $n=4$
- Metropolitan suburbs, NSW: $n=3$
- Southern regional NSW: $n=2$
- Western inland regional NSW: $n=1$

Five of the schools were identified as being ‘lighthouse schools’ for various reasons including for their student-led or student-centred programs relating to student welfare, student learning, Indigenous culture, or community engagement. The variability between the regions and across the schools offered diverse understandings and approaches to the facilitation and experience of participation in Australian schools.

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

The principal at each school was invited to participate in an interview along with two teachers (one being a head teacher or equivalent). Staff who agreed to be involved generally had an interest in student participation and/or a role linked to student wellbeing. For instance, the teachers and head teachers were often wellbeing or SRC coordinators at their school. In total, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with nine principals, 13 teachers and 10 head teachers across the 10 schools. (One school requested additional interviews so that each of their wellbeing coordinators ($n=3$) could take part, because they felt it offered a valuable opportunity to reflect on the current student participation and student wellbeing practices at the school). Across the schools, the years of teaching experience varied considerably amongst staff interviewed (ranging from approximately 1-30 years), and there was a gender spread of females ($n=13$) and males ($n=19$).

In addition to the school-based staff, nine policy staff agreed to be interviewed from across a range of different policy portfolios including leadership, disability, Indigenous education and student engagement. These were identified by the project partners as having a key leadership role in policy areas related to the interests of the research. Five policy staff were from the NSW Department of Education, two from the NSW Catholic Education Commission and a further two from local Diocesan Catholic Schools offices. Five policymakers were female and four male.

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

The research sought to hear from a wide range of students, not just those perceived to be articulate and/or in leadership roles. To achieve this aim, the principal was asked to nominate a person from the school who could help organise the sessions and recruit participants for the focus groups. Those identified were often head teachers, assistant principals or wellbeing coordinators. These personnel were asked to recruit a random sample of students, via means such as every fifth or tenth student on the roll and to then distribute and collect invitations and consent forms to these students and their parents.

At each school, one focus group was conducted with a mixed group of Year 7-8 students (aged 13-14 years), and a second with a mixed group of students in Years 9-10 (aged 14-16 years). The rationale for choosing these two age groups was guided by research which suggests that the middle school years are a period of significant change and development for young people in relation to forming their identities and taking on increased civic engagement and responsibilities (Mitra, 2004). While the 'middle years' in NSW schools generally refers to Years 5-9 (which includes the transition from primary to secondary schools) the decision was taken to collect data only in secondary schools given the markedly different nature of primary and secondary education and the need to limit the scope of the study. Additionally, in the period between Years 7-10 some students become increasingly disengaged from school and feel it is increasingly irrelevant to their lives (Black et al., 2009; Gray & Hackling, 2009; Holdsworth, 2000). Hence, understanding the views and experiences of participation at school for this particular age cohort emerged as a priority for the research.

In total there were 20 focus groups held across the 10 schools. It was proposed that 8-10 students would participate in each focus group. However, this number varied between schools, depending upon availability of students on the day. Therefore, final focus group sizes ranged from four to fifteen, with a mode of nine. In total, 177 students participated in focus groups across the ten schools.

Generally, the recruitment process worked as intended, although there were a small number of instances where the focus groups appeared to have a higher than likely proportion (based on random selection) of student members from the Student Representative Council or from other leadership groups – the 'select few' students. Most of the time, however, the students tended not to know each other well and were from diverse backgrounds with varied views and experiences. One school had over-recruited students ($n=15$) for one of the focus groups, assuming that some students would not be available or want to participate, but everyone attended. This particular session was unwieldy to manage, and resulted in participants breaking into two different conversations. Further, the digital recording of the interview for this group was difficult to transcribe given the number of students and competing voices.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to conducting the qualitative phase, ethics approval and ethics variation applications were sought from Southern Cross University's Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: ECN-15-017), the NSW Department of Education's State Education Research Applications Process (approval number: SERAP-2015147) as well as each relevant Diocese for the Catholic schools. Voluntary consent was sought from adult participants (see Appendices B and C for copies of the information letters and consent forms), and parental consent (see Appendix D) was obtained for student participation in the focus groups along with prior voluntary consent (see Appendix E) and on-going assent from the students themselves. Confidentiality and anonymity was assured for all participants (whether in a focus group or a staff / policymaker interview) and they could ask for the recording to be stopped at any time and request for sections of the interview to be erased, if desired. In addition to these routines of good ethical research practice, ethics was approached as an on-going reflexive endeavour throughout the study in line with the core tenets of the international Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) Charter and Guidance (Graham et al., 2013).

SCHOOL STAFF AND POLICYMAKER INTERVIEWS

The staff and policymaker interview schedules were developed around the following key interests, with questions contextualised and adapted for the different groups:

- What is participation?
- Why do participation school?
- What are the ways students currently participate at school?
- How is such participation experienced?
- Who encourages/ supports participation?
- What could be done differently at school?

The interviews with the adult participants followed a semi-structured format connected to the interests above (see Appendices F-H) and lasted 30-40 minutes. The aim was to explore each participant's understanding of student participation, along with their experiences / perceptions of how it is facilitated at their school or in policy. The interviews also explored their experiences (or sometimes beliefs) of the key challenges and benefits of student participation at school and/or in policy. The semi-structured interview schedule was first piloted with a small sample within regional NSW. This offered the opportunity to refine the schedule to more effectively explore the personal perspectives and experiences of participants. (Please note that data from the interviews with the pilot participants was not analysed for the main study).

STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

The same overarching questions listed above helped to guide the development of the student focus group scaffold (see Appendix I). Focus groups were employed for students rather than interviews as this method is reputed to help encourage discussion and the development of students' ideas, acknowledge students as experts, feel less threatening than a one-on-one interview, and reduce the 'adult-child' power imbalances because there are more students than adults present in the group (Heary & Hennessy, 2002). The phrasing and format of the focus group questions were carefully constructed to accommodate the diversity of participants' backgrounds and their range of participation experiences. Students from the project advisory group advised on this, along with the project partners. The advisory group students suggested that the term 'having a say' was a good proxy for student participation when explaining the research project and related questions to students. As such, the research team incorporated this term into the language of the focus group schedules. Two pilots were conducted to trial the focus group questions and activities (which are detailed below), and further revisions were made to the focus group schedule following each pilot, in consultation with project partners and the project advisory group.

Whenever possible, two researchers co-facilitated each of the 80 minute focus groups, which involved prompting and assisting with the various activities (see below). The spaces for these sessions were chosen by the staff member assisting the researchers at each school, often being held in meeting rooms, in the school library or student common rooms. At one school, two school staff members were present, sitting on another table in the background and the Principal dropped in at the beginning of one of the sessions. Having adults present was not ideal, as students may have felt constrained or unable to speak candidly about their school knowing that teachers were present. Despite the challenge this posed, it seemed that students in these focus groups felt comfortable to speak freely, talking loudly, joking with each other and being authentic in their appraisal of the school in relation to student participation. At all the other schools, no school staff were present during the focus groups.

FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITIES

Activity 1 and 5 – What is Participation? Before and After Data

At the beginning of the focus group, students were asked to jot down their thoughts on what the term ‘student participation’ means to them. This activity was designed to specifically capture students’ understandings prior to any discussion. The group then revisited their definition towards the end of the focus group to add any further thoughts after having had an in-depth discussion on the topic.

Activity 2 – Scenario to Explore Student Participation

The literature indicated, and the project advisory group confirmed, that the term ‘participation’ may not be well understood in schools. A vignette was created with three different solutions to resolve a problem in a school setting, allowing the focus group participants to immerse themselves in three different levels of student participation at school – non-participation, a tokenistic form of participation and a more collaborative form of participation. This activity was a way of immersing participants in the topic and to move their thinking away from notions of simply ‘participating in activities’ (see Appendix I for the vignette used).

Activity 3 – How is Participation Facilitated: Incorporating Hart’s Ladder

Through the piloting process, the researchers became aware that some students did not experience, or perceived that they did not experience, many participatory activities at school. Activity 3 aimed to try to facilitate deeper conversation about the different sorts of participatory experiences currently taking place in schools. A laminated copy of Hart’s (1992) ladder was shown to the group, with the following definitions and labels for each rung of the ladder:

Non-participatory

- **RUNG 1:** Manipulation - Students forced to attend without regard to interest
- **RUNG 2:** Decoration - Students are present but are not given a voice
- **RUNG 3:** Tokenism - Students appear to be given a voice, but actually have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate

Teacher initiated

- **RUNG 4:** Informed by students – Students ideas and opinions are respected but not necessarily used
- **RUNG 5:** Students consulted – Students are consulted and their opinions are taken seriously
- **RUNG 6:** Adult initiated, shared decisions with students - Adults invite students to share decisions for their idea

Student initiated

- **RUNG 6:** Student driven - Students come up with ideas and lead action
- **RUNG 7:** Student initiated, shared decisions with adults – Students come up with the idea, set-up the project and ask adults to join them.

This ladder acted as an aid for students to gain a wider understanding of the different forms participation may take and to help them to reflect more widely on the current activities at their school. During the discussion, the researchers noted down the activities the students mentioned on star shaped post-it® notes. Students were then invited to position each star on a rung of the ladder. This activity allowed the group to map out not only what was happening at the school, but also their perceptions of the nature of the various activities. This activity was adapted from resources designed for evaluating and monitoring young people's meaningful student participation (Lansdown & O'Kane, 2014). Students were often very engaged during the activity and at times there was considerable debate as to where to position the stars, sometimes without consensus being reached (in which the case the star was sometimes ripped in half to be placed on two rungs of the ladder).

Activity 4 - What are the Benefits – For You and the School?

The researchers also wanted to explore whether the students inferred any benefits when they experienced student participation. After refining this activity in the pilot, it was decided to make this an individual activity whereby students were asked to write down on different coloured post-it® notes any benefits of student participation they had experienced or perceived for themselves and any benefits for their school. The students were asked to then share what they had written with the group and to consider whether any of these were connected to their wellbeing.

Activity 6 - What Change is Needed? 'Being the Principal' Activity

After re-visiting their definition of student participation (Activity 5, as described earlier), students were then invited to imagine they were the principal, and to individually write down strategies they would put in place to support student participation. This activity was designed to elicit insight into how students would improve the current participation practices at their school.

Activity 7 - Mapping a Participatory School

During activities 4 and 6, the researchers 'mapped' the students' ideas on large sheets of paper or a white board. Collectively, this served to display their visions for their ideal participatory school. When all of the benefits and strategies were collated, students were given the opportunity to reflect on any barriers that might stop or limit this ideal school from happening in reality. This activity allowed the groups to reflect further upon current practices at their school and what might need to change for student participation to become a more embedded part of their school community.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from the interviews and focus groups were all transcribed, coded and analysed for recurring themes and patterns using the NVivo® software program. The additional written data gathered from the activities in the focus groups was also transcribed or photographed and input into NVivo® alongside the interview transcriptions. Photographs of the rungs of Hart's ladder with the star post-it® notes were numerically analysed into categories to identify re-occurring activities in relation to each rung.

Initial themes were developed from the questions that guided the interview and focus group schedules – the what, why, how, who of participation, and what could change. This was followed by deeper coding of the emergent themes within each of these areas to better understand the processes and nuances occurring across the schools. The overarching themes and emergent themes were then critically reviewed, collapsed and refined in a cyclical manner. The final results were collated under the following headings:

- The policy context
- What is participation?
- How is participation experienced?
- Perceived benefits
- Barriers
- Improving participation at school

The headings provide the structure for the presentation of the findings in the following section.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 THE POLICY CONTEXT

The Phase 1 policy analysis highlighted that while there is arguably a growing emphasis on participation in education policy (both implicitly and, to a lesser extent, explicitly), there is no definitional or conceptual clarity around what participation means and no synergy between policy documents. The interviews with policy staff ($n=9$) offered an opportunity to try to make better sense of this ambiguity, by seeking policymakers views on how student participation is positioned within current policy priorities, what they consider to be the implicit participation interests within current policy, and whether and how future educational policy might progress these interests. Here we report, firstly, upon the policymakers' conceptualisations of participation and their beliefs regarding the limitations and opportunities within the current policy environment. Later, further data from the policymakers will be presented alongside matters arising in the student and teacher data.

POLICYMAKERS' CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF PARTICIPATION

Verifying our findings from Phase 1, the policy personnel confirmed there is currently no specific educational policy mandating, advocating or supporting student participation. As such, no clear statement exists regarding what student participation is (and what it is not) in the Australian school context. Despite this, and notwithstanding the wide ranging portfolios of the policy personnel, most were consistent in aligning student participation at school with student involvement and decision-making in their own learning, referred to variously as student-centred, personalised or individualised learning. It was acknowledged that certain groups of students are presently offered a more intentional and explicit experience of participation in their learning, notably those with additional support needs, but some envisaged an expansion of this to all students in the near future:

That's going to be a big goal over the next couple of years... giving the ownership to the child and that self- directed learning to the child so they can be actively engaged in their learning.
(Policymaker 9)

This concerted emphasis, while clear, suggests a specific and relatively narrow conceptualisation of student participation. This is relevant to keep in mind when considering all subsequent data from the policymakers, as well as the student and teachers' understandings and experiences of student participation later.

Beyond notions of personalised learning, participation tended to be conceptualised by policymakers in terms of adult-directed consultation. Most discussed the potential for such consultation both at the school level, to inform school planning, as well as at a systemic level in relation to the development of educational policy. Again, it was noted that at present there is a greater imperative on hearing from particular groups of students (such as those with disabilities, gifted and talented students, underachievers or those with behavioural problems) because addressing the needs of these students is more strongly mandated or linked to current policy and/or performance requirements.

A DISJOINTED POLICY LANDSCAPE

While expanding some forms of student participation to all students was a goal for the future, it was recognised that at present the compliance and accountability pressures on schools might be taking priority over meaningful student participation:

Unfortunately I think there's a disconnect. The compliance imperatives, the capital A Accountability, driven from Myschool - I don't think lends itself to spending a lot of time thinking about what Year 9 want, to be frank. (Policymaker 7)

In addition to challenging the impetus for student participation, it was recognised that the compliance agenda can overshadow the influence of students' perspectives:

The other complexity around that is...[if] students would say, "I want a teacher to be fair"... we don't measure teachers by being fair. We don't measure teachers by engagement. (Policymaker 3)

A similar sense of disconnect was described in relation to the content-driven syllabus:

I think that's one of the reasons why they talk about disengagement from the age of about 13 or 14, because to some extent we come in from an arrogant perspective. We focus on content, we focus on this is what you've got to do now, this is what the syllabus says we've got to do, we've got to do this so you get a good HSC result in five years time, and it doesn't matter what you think. (Policymaker 1)

Some policy participants believed that such disconnects were at the heart of much teacher stress and disillusionment.

Despite the constraints, some policymakers believed that the emphasis on compliance need not limit efforts towards student participation. There were some beliefs that student participation remains a possibility within the current policy landscape, providing schools are willing to seek out the opportunities and adopt more imaginative thinking:

I think some principals, and then that goes down through the school staff, I think they have convinced themselves that there's less flexibility than there is...It's true that you've got to follow the BOSTES syllabuses. It's true that you've got to meet the BOSTES teacher standards. It's true you've got to meet the AITSL teacher standards. It's true you've got to worry about ACARA. But there are ways you can do that in a creative and flexible way. (Policymaker 7)

To this end, some participants advised that 'the mantra of evidence-based decision making is not going to go away' and that the education sector needs to 'see how we can turn it to our own purposes' (Policymaker 7). Some policymakers made quite explicit connections concerning the centrality of student participation to the accountability agenda: 'we're evidence-based, we need the evidence, but this is probably the most key thing - that evidence is people's lived experiences...' (Policymaker 3). However, others lamented that 'the challenge is convincing people that [student participation is] going to improve performance' (Policymaker 1).

Overall, it was reasoned that the process of incorporating student participation into an evidence and compliance-based agenda would take time, but was achievable. Some participants described the importance of not stifling the enthusiasm of those already committed to participation, allowing them to seek solutions at a grassroots level and for these to filter into other areas and schools:

Both the previous Labor government and the current Federal government have been on the cusp a couple of times in the last six years of making [satisfaction surveys for parents and students] compulsory...We've actually resisted that because our view is...the best way to kill something off is make it compulsory. Everyone just goes through the motions. So we've said, don't make it compulsory but we understand what you're talking about and we encourage it. (Policymaker 7)

In any change process... you get the early adopters... so people see things working and all you need is a very small number in say each school supportive of this... And then you need to be able to not constrict the evolution of these things by regulation or by bureaucracy. People have got to be free to innovate and adapt what is going to work for them. (Policymaker 5)

There was a sense then that despite the constraints, the education sector is embarking on a process of change, *'I think that we're in a transition, we're in a great opportunity now as far as moving to that...total self-directed learner...it is in that area of pedagogy that I think there is the most growth'* (Policymaker 9). With this understanding of change in mind, we turn now to consider how students and teachers make sense of the growing participation agenda and what is currently happening in schools.

4.2 WHAT IS PARTICIPATION?

Bearing in mind the policy participants' conceptualisations of student participation, we turn now to consider how teachers and students conceived of the concept. As detailed in the method above, students were asked to jot down their ideas at the start, and these mainly revolved around participation *in* activities or 'having a say'. Towards the end of the focus groups they were then offered the opportunity to review their ideas and make any adaptations with the benefit of having had an in-depth discussion on the topic, the results presented below are drawn mainly from these later ideas. In the staff interviews the question was posed only towards the end of the interview, offering participants the similar benefit of reflecting upon their narrative.

Rather than a narrow focus on personalised learning, it was evident amongst student and staff participants that student participation at school is understood in an array of different ways. This array more closely aligns with the range of ways participation currently arises in policy, as highlighted in our Phase 1 policy analysis (see Phase 1 report). Staff described how the diversity of contexts applied to the term can cause confusion about what participation actually means, and how to know if it is being achieved:

The use of the word participation might throw off some educators, cause it's used differently, in different contexts. (Principal, School F)

Well to me if a student participates they do the work set but if there's consultation on what the work is - you need to define the question! Are they participating in the process or are they participating in the product?... Playing for the hockey team you're participating in playing hockey, or are you kind of choosing the sport? (Teacher, School E)

Commonly, they tried to explain their understandings of participation by bringing in other terms or concepts, particularly involvement, engagement or ownership, although this could lead to further complexities. For example, conceiving participation as engagement raised tensions around its compatibility with the core business of schools:

When you're in the classroom we talk about 'student engagement', and then ask the question is 'student engagement' the same as 'student learning'? Because kids can be really actively engaged and still be learning almost nothing... (Principal, School B)

Whilst an enormous breadth of nuanced ideas and conceptualisations emerged, these began, overall, to crystallise around four themes (as listed below). It is important to note that this is not intended to imply that individual definitions fitted neatly into one of the themes. On the contrary, individual's ideas tended to encompass aspects of many themes, as the following example highlights:

Student participation means that we, as students, participate in a wide variety of things, which may include but not be limited to: decision making, doing projects and even socialising. (Yr 9-10, School H)

At times, participants also described participation as a range, whereby various depths of participation can occur:

Engaged, active, assertive, confident I think that's important...If I just sat here [in this interview] I would still be participating, but I guess by saying things and you know taking interest...I'm 'actively' participating so I think it's kind of like putting that verb in front of it. (Teacher, School G)

With this complexity foregrounded, we turn to exploring the four predominant themes around which staff and students' ideas coalesced:

- **Having voice**
- **Having influence**
- **Having choice**
- **Working together**

HAVING VOICE

Students most commonly explained participation in terms of *'having a voice'* (Yr 9-10, School B) or *'having a say'* (Yr 9-10, School J). For the students, 'having voice' referred to notions such as *'giving opinions and feedback'* (Yr 7-8, School A) or *'saying what's on your mind'* (Yr 7-8, School H). Students also felt that the extent of their contribution was important:

How much say students get. (Year 7-8, School C)

Not having the limitations of what you are able to say. (Year 7-8, School H)

In general, students' thoughts tended to focus on individual voice, although some definitions were more inclusive, describing participation as a construct that involves *'everyone having a say'* (Yr 7-8, School B) or everyone contributing.

While there was a strong emphasis amongst students in connecting participation to voice, this was much less prevalent amongst staff. Some staff discussed participation in terms of students 'having voice,' but this tended to be couched within limitations:

I think every kid should have the opportunity to voice their opinion on any aspect of school life, to a certain degree. (Head Teacher, School D)

...we accept students who have their say, if they are willing to take on the responsibilities of our community. (Teacher, School B)

Several staff, who tended to describe participation in terms of involvement, explicitly excluded any form of 'voice' or 'choice' from their definition:

The student voice...that I see as a separate type of thing. (Teacher, School C)

To me student participation is different than student voice, although voice could be seen as participation. (Principal, School C)

The disparity between students and teachers around participation and 'having voice' may be partly attributable to the use of 'having a say' as a proxy for student participation early in the focus group activities. That said, the persistence of the disparity, even following scope for discussion during the focus groups and interviews, is an interesting tension to bear in mind when examining later data regarding how student participation is experienced.

HAVING INFLUENCE

The idea that participation connects to 'having influence' builds upon notions of voice. Students often explicitly extended their definitions of voice to emphasise *'having your voice heard'* (Yr 9-10, School A), *'feeling like your opinion is valued'* (Yr 9-10, School F) or is *'being taken into consideration'* (Yr 7-8, School G). Essentially, the notion of 'having influence' captures the importance that *'[Students'] ideas are heard and recognised and acted upon'* (Yr 7-8, School C). For some students these ideas were also discussed in terms of *'Listening to what your peers have to say'* (Yr 7-8, School H), although the main focus was on being listened to by adults.

Some teachers also advocated the importance of 'having influence:'

Being able to put forward their ideas, and seeing some negotiations of those ideas occur.
(Teacher, School J)

It's also about students recognising that they are recognised, that they are valued... (Principal, School B).

Extending upon feelings of value, some staff and students indicated that 'having influence' would likely strengthen students' motivation to participate:

I would define it as a student feeling valued enough to want to participate, so that it becomes the norm. (Head Teacher, School E)

Although the overall emphasis upon 'having influence' was not as common as comments about 'having voice', it is clear that this was an important distinction. It is also necessary to consider that some students may not have made this distinction explicit - there could be an assumption that when refer to 'having a voice', 'having influence' is deemed an integral part of this.

HAVING CHOICE

If having voice, and by extension influence, was the predominant way by which students conceptualised participation, notions of choice were strongest amongst the staff narratives. The idea that participation is 'having choice' was sometimes connected to 'having a say,' albeit in a more limited way, such as having the opportunity to choose between certain options: *'They'll get a small choice because they'll choose their electives'* (Principal, School G). More pertinent to conceptualisations of participation though, was the idea that participation is something one actively chooses to do. Teachers sought to describe how participation was a more 'active' form of engagement or involvement, whether in extra-curricular activities or in learning:

It's more a conscious decision to do something above just general attendance.
(Head Teacher, School F)

For me student participation is about kids actively and willingly and openly engaging in their curriculum because they want to educate themselves, they want to make their life better or they want to reach potential if there's something out there that they know is for them but they need to do this to get there. (Principal, School C)

Many students pointed to a similar notions such as *'actively working in class, joining in and trying hard'* (Year 7-8, School E) or general ideas of a willingness to 'have a go.'

Both the staff and students' ideas here seem to be around taking ownership of one's participation or learning. This idea that participation is an active choice to involve oneself, have a go or take part, confers a level of agency upon students, yet at the same time may be seen to impose an expectation that they are willing and able to do so.

WORKING TOGETHER

For many students, participation was about a greater sense of equality between students and staff, *'Where the students have an equal voice with the teachers and the school'* (Year 9-10, School G). Some students also extended this to a sense of belonging in school community more broadly, describing participation as *'being included or feeling included'* (Yr 9-10, School A). While earlier ideas about choice placed the impetus upon *students* to actively involve themselves, notions of equality and inclusion places a level of impetus on others – the school, culture, teachers etc. - to help facilitate the participation of all students. A few staff members picked up on this:

It's about building up courage of kids to become involved in things and supporting them whilst they're developing their skills and abilities, and I think that's the genuine participation...and not the tokenistic stuff. (Principal, School G)

This suggests a scaffolding of participatory skills – the idea of dual responsibility around participation rather than placing the impetus solely on students.

Students described a similar idea although in less educational terms. They focused more upon participation as integral to community and the idea of members of that community working together towards a common goal:

I personally think student participation centres around students gathering together with support of teachers to encourage them to be involved in activities both extra and curricular.

(Year 9-10, School D)

...participation would include everyone working together and understanding each other and the other person's point of view. (Yr 9-10, School B)

Overall, a strong sense of the reciprocal nature of participation, relationships, community and working together emerged through participants' definitions, particularly those of the students, which began to overlap into the beneficial outcomes of enhanced participation. Here though, these reciprocal, relational understandings of participation reinforce the complexity of defining participation as an isolated construct. While this section cannot be concluded with a succinct definition of participation that captures all participants' beliefs and understandings, significant insight has been gained into its nuanced and multi-layered nature.

4.3 HOW IS PARTICIPATION EXPERIENCED?

Acknowledging the disjointed policy landscape around student participation, and remaining mindful of the varying ways in which participation is understood, in this section we turn to consider how student participation is currently experienced at school. The data here is drawn mainly from the student focus groups and staff interviews, with occasional additions from the policymakers' interviews. Collectively, this data highlights a number of arenas within which participation occurs:

- Organised participatory opportunities
- In the classroom
- School activities outside of class
- Student-teacher relationships
- Educational policy development

Each of these will be briefly considered below.

ORGANISED PARTICIPATORY OPPORTUNITIES

When asked about opportunities to participate at their school, many participants' thoughts first turned to the structures designed to formally offer students a 'voice'. There were a number of such structures common across the schools including student leadership initiatives and the ubiquitous Student Representative Council (SRC). As existing literature has highlighted, there was a general consensus across students and staff in most schools that the existing SRC model was not working well:

It's trying to say, "Yes we as staff respect you guys and we want to hear what you have to say until it gets to...what you have to say because then we're going to ignore everything"... I feel like it's kind of all for show in a way...You have a small chance of being able to get what you want, but it's so unlikely that we often assume that it won't happen and that stops us from fighting for it...It's really a horrible cycle - the teachers thinking, "Oh they don't care," and it just gets worse and worse every time. (Yr 9-10, School E)

It was felt that SRCs limited 'voice' to just a small number of students, with little evidence of other students being able to raise concerns with their student representatives or of feedback filtering back to the wider student body. In addition, it was believed that the 'voice' offered, even to SRC members, was offered within narrow parameters and or had limited influence:

I've been on SRC for three years. I quit because I know this school has given us a label and said, "The SRC - you've got a voice." but we don't really. (Yr 9-10, School C)

I think in a way they don't really understand how important some things are to students, like I find that things that students find important are different to what adults find important. If this is a school like for children I think we should, our suggestions should be taken.
(Yr 9-10, School F)

Several schools had attempted to improve on the traditional SRC model. For instance, rather than two representatives per school year, one approach was to elect two representatives from each class, so that students knew one another and felt more comfortable to share and discuss ideas. Other schools had done away with the election of committee members altogether, and any student could turn up at the designated meeting time to share their ideas or have their say, or a specific time was allocated weekly for all students to raise issues and ideas for the SRC to pursue:

It's a 20 minute period where the students will raise things that they want to be taken to the SRC - they can talk as a student body. So the year meetings are a two way conversation between staff and the students to get things moving. (Principal, School J)

In such schools students were better able to identify the positive influence of their SRCs, such as negotiating for extensive renovations to the school toilets or organisation of a designated seniors' area. The principal from one such school also described the extent to which they had gone to in order to ensure student participation in their school planning process:

We actually do it through the SRC and we took them off for... two days actually, where we went through and we said, 'What do we want it to be?' So it was open, gave them a bit of a scaffold and they came up with what needed to happen...they worked intensively on it and there was total engagement. (Principal, School J)

This was one of the only schools where students perceived that the SRC had significant power to change things within the school: *'You'll be surprised of what we can do and change'* (Yr 7-8, School J). In general, it was clear that many SRCs were not working well to facilitate student participation, although new ideas were beginning to be trialled in an effort to improve upon the model.

IN THE CLASSROOM

The classroom did not tend to be identified first when participants discussed participatory opportunities at school. However, students and teachers later shared a range of ways in which student participation occurred in the classroom context. Notably, much of this revolved around notions of choice. Students mentioned the importance of being able to choose where to sit in the classroom, a topic prevalent in the student discussions, although rarely mentioned by teachers. However, it was evident across all of the schools that teachers were striving to offer students increasing opportunities to make choices in relation to their school work, such as choosing the focus of a project or the mode of delivery of assignments (writing an essay or presenting it in a movie format). Several schools in the study had gone further and had moved entirely to project based learning approaches in Years 7-10 and problem based learning in Years 11 and 12. Students experiencing this approach tended to be extremely positive about it and made connections to their sense of wellbeing:

...you had a set of choices...but there was pretty much everything there... I got to present the one I wanted to. I knew stuff about it, but I wanted to learn more and it sort of made me like happy I got to choose that one. (Yr 9-10, School H)

Other schools mentioned this approach in an aspirational way, believing it offered the opportunity to take student participation to the next level. For most schools though, offering students small choices in the classroom seemed to be a fairly new development, with students explaining, *'Lately we... get to choose a song in music...and we have a lot of room in our assignments now...'* (Yr 7-8, School C). Despite only being able to choose from a limited range of options, the students seemed to really appreciate such opportunities for choice in the classroom setting. One of the principals believed, *'Students are a little bit nervous about being asked to make choices, because they're not quite used to it'* (Principal, School B). However, no apprehension around choices was evident in the student narratives, suggesting that the apprehension may be coming from teachers and schools, as they begin to overturn long established educational norms.

In addition to day-to-day classroom practices, in most schools the students are offered some choices for elective subjects from Year 8-9, with the opportunity to choose increasing each year thereafter. Two schools had gone to extraordinary lengths to privilege student choice in this process (and these were not those who had adopted project / problem based learning approaches). These two schools offered the widest possible range of electives they could, and then sought to staff this based on student choices:

...I know some schools set the line and say, "You'll choose from this", but we don't have any predetermined lines or anything. The kids totally set the curriculum pattern in the senior school. (Head Teacher, School I)

Clearly, this approach had significant implications upon staffing and timetabling, with close to half of the staff at one of the schools being casual or temporary teachers. However, despite such hurdles, it was felt that the approach has *'massive benefits for these students'* (Principal, School C), with both students and teachers being more enthusiastic towards the subject. This was an example whereby through the privileging of student choice long established norms of schooling had been adapted. However, it was evident that not all schools were willing or able to make such a shift:

They'll get a small choice...but to a degree that's very limited...because [a] school is only gonna put up electives which they can staff. (Principal, School G)

In addition to notions of choice, some schools were striving to personalise the learning process by better involving students in their learning journey and better catering to their learning needs. These aspects were described by students and staff as a key component of project / problem based learning approaches. In other schools, a number of new formative assessment and reflective programs had been introduced to help to encourage more regular feedback and discussion between students and teachers about the learning process. Some of these programs involved students in creating the marking scheme that they would be assessed against and / or self-assessing their work:

... actually unpacking what does quality look like and this sort of thing. What does it mean to be good? What are the criteria? What are those elements? ...[Then] they assess...and then I would assess...and we would compare our assessments. (Head Teacher, School C).

A critical aspect of improving the teaching and learning cycle is the sticky process of student-teacher feedback - the opportunity for students to raise issues with teachers on the effectiveness of lessons, as well as to provide more general feedback on teaching style. This form of participation was discussed by the students as challenging dominant norms of authority, expertise and power, and required navigation of delicate inter-relational dynamics: *'It's hard because...they might take it personally and they might not, but it just depends'* (Yr 7-8, School D). The students described the way some individual teachers' openness allowed them to effectively participate in this important way:

We had a prac teacher and he just sort of went at the end of each lesson, "What do you guys reckon we should do next lesson? What do you need help with?" and all that stuff... It was good. We sort of got, you know, you could say what you didn't understand and things like that. (Yr 9-10, School A)

While such processes often rely on the approach of individual teachers and student-teacher relationships, some more formal initiatives emerged. An interesting example involved training a small group of students to observe teachers and students in the classroom and to then provide feedback to teachers, on the effectiveness of the lesson, having been *'taught how to speak to an adult in such a way that then it's all positive'* (Head Teacher, School E).

While there was considerable movement towards personalised approaches to learning, it was evident that the concept of catering to students' learning needs could sometimes be difficult to reconcile with notions of student participation. One principal highlighted this tension, reinforcing the definitional complexity explored earlier:

Our Year 11 English Advanced class, for instance, when I read their reports I wasn't terribly impressed with the level at which they were operating. So I went and spoke to them about what was happening for them, and what were some of their suggestions in terms of what we needed to do...I don't really see that as student participation, I actually just see that as good communication between students and teachers. So I guess I'm finding it difficult to separate those two things. I think that's more about relationship than participation as such.

(Principal, School F)

At other times, catering to students' needs could be conflated with creating fun and interesting ways of delivering curriculum content. For instance, teachers described with enthusiasm a wide range of innovative projects they had undertaken, such as having students develop computer games and having students *'compete to come up with a best investment of my four million'* (Teacher, School E). Whilst not discrediting the uniqueness and creativity of these ideas, what was evident from the narratives was that these often followed the teachers' interests:

Where it was a fun - like I thought it was a way of doing it - there's just some students that just don't want to do things like that. (Teacher, School G)

Therefore, within their enthusiasm, student participation, rather than solely engagement, might be being overlooked.

Despite these conceptual complexities, it was clear that, across the schools, pedagogy was beginning to change in favour of increased student participation. This process was not always straightforward, challenging many long established norms of schooling, including hierarchical tensions between teachers and students. However, students seemed largely appreciative of the changes and particularly the choices being offered to them. They tended to place these classroom-based choices quite high on Hart's ladder of participation – much higher than perhaps the limited nature of the choice would appear to warrant – perhaps because they represent such a shift from their expectations and prior educational norms. As one student noted, *'I feel like when it comes to policies we're not heard a lot but in actual classrooms we do have a lot more of a say'* (Yr 9-10, School E). This positivity was echoed in some staff narratives: *'I think probably over the last 18 months at classroom level the kids actually have more say now than they perhaps ever have had'* (Principal, School C).

SCHOOL ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF CLASS

Almost all participants believed that a key arena for experiencing student participation at school was through becoming involved in activities outside of the classroom. Across the schools, a wide range of sport clubs, creative groups, academic extension groups and volunteering opportunities, as well as school excursions, camps, fundraising, environmental groups and social events were described. In comparison to the classroom setting, students often seemed to feel – or expect – much more of an active voice in extra-curricular activities, being much more critical in their placement of these activities on Hart's ladder of participation.

Of particular importance was that, after choosing to become a member of a group, committee, sport or activity, students sought greater opportunities to authentically *influence* the direction or activities of the group. Commonly, while students could choose to join a group or committee, they then had set organisational tasks, such as to organise an annual event (a fundraiser, sports carnival or school ball). Sometimes students had little choice within this, leaving them with a minimal sense of agency in their participation:

It's not like you actually choose what you do. Like you almost always have athletics, swimming and cross country so [you] might choose like where you have it or something, but it's still like you're still probably going to do those. (Yr 7-8, School F)

In such instances, students could feel that participation was forced and laborious, draining their enthusiasm for participating in such capacities: *'It was a lot of work for not much'* (Yr 7-8, School C).

In general, students appeared to be most enthusiastic about opportunities to approach teachers with a new event or idea:

So a couple of weeks ago a student wanted to help donate money to the local (hospital). So...we got the hospital involved and we had a mufti day and it was a gold coin so all the money that was raised...[got] donated to [the hospital]. (Year 7-8, School H)

However, some students felt their school had little interest in these kinds of ideas and were unwilling to give permission or offer support. This reality was echoed in the narratives of many teachers who raised concern about the number of potential ideas and lamented the limited time to support or respond to these. Some teachers had found the level of teacher facilitation required to be substantial, leading them to describe students as full of ideas but with little motivation or know-how to see their ideas through to fruition:

I think they love to want to think they want to have a say, but when it comes down to the coal face or it comes down to actually doing the work, they don't do anything...they have the idea and then they want the adults to do all the work (Teacher, School B).

Indeed, there was considerable tension around the process and extent of student participation in this space.

There were some examples of longer-term, extra-curricular initiatives that were perceived by students and staff to work well. One school had a student-initiated community youth club, which continued to be organised and run by subsequent year groups of students. In another school, both students and staff favourably described a student media group. This group was responsible for developing videos of school life and events, but had considerable creative freedom over how it did so, as well as special permission to access the media suite and associated resources. It is possible these examples sustained longer-term success because they offered students on-going scope to influence the direction and/or activities of the groups.

STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

As has been evident throughout much of the data so far, it was clear that relationships are a key medium for students' experiences of participation at school. As adults are often the key-bearers to student participation, there was particular emphasis on student-teacher relationships as a critical conduit for the experience of participation.

Students and staff indicated that it was important that staff in the school know students' names and make an effort to get to know them. A key strategy for this was for teachers to proactively ask questions and actively listen to the response:

... kind of a bit silly to say but they kind of makes you feel like they care a bit more, like, you know they care but when they actually ask like how you're coping with the work it kind of makes you feel a bit more like personal type of thing (Yr 7-8, School F)

Students felt that the critical aspect of these conversations is that they can lead to positive change arising:

I've had a lot of days off this year and I did the science exam, the Year 10 half yearly and I got really, really bad [mark] because I hadn't been here. And he scrapped it and he said, "I know you've been away," so he gave me a mark on my actual school work instead of the exam. (Yr 9-10, School G)

There was a strong emphasis from students that through such conversations and positive outcomes they felt that they were being treated as a ‘normal person’ (Yr 9-10, School E) – as human beings and on an equal level.

Some programs, such as the increasingly popular restorative justice or ‘Restorative Practice Model’ were described as helping to facilitate such approaches to student-teacher encounter. This model aims specifically to offer students greater participation in their behaviour management:

Instead of dishing out a punishment they work through and have a say in how to fix it. So I think they feel a bit valued and that their input’s important. It’s a good model to use... it’s not a something extra, it’s just a different way of talking. (Teacher 4, School A)

Students often indicated that younger teachers tend to be better at adopting such participative approaches, saying this was due to teachers being closer to their age and could relate to them more easily. Similarly, one principal suggested that ‘young staff... are more open to... non-traditional methods of teaching’ (Principal, School J). However, other students countered that age was not always a factor and it really was dependent on the individual teacher: **‘They can still relate but just like in an older person sort of way’ (Yr 9-10, School D)**. More important than age were other characteristics, such as the teacher’s commitment to helping students understand a difficult concept or their ability to help students feel safe to ask questions:

...if a teacher makes you feel comfortable and are friendly and it’s easy for you to ask questions and you feel safe wanting to ask questions, not like embarrassed. (Yr 9-10, School H)

S1: Apparently when kids go in there he gives them hot chocolate so they can calm down and then he talks to them. S2: He’s got a real way of speaking to students (Yr 7-8, School I)

It is worth noting that it was sometimes difficult to decipher whether students were simply talking about what makes a ‘good teacher’ or focusing on staff who support their participation. Nevertheless, it seems that having a staff member who is approachable, trustworthy and takes consideration of their personal life, helps students to experience a sense of participation because they feel safe, supported and encouraged to do so, even if just with that particular individual.

This idea was formalised in most schools through a structure variously called homeroom, roll, tutor or pastoral care groups. These structures place a small group of students with a key teacher – a ‘school mum’ as one teacher described herself – who remains consistent throughout their whole time at the school. Some schools had instigated ‘vertical’ structures, whereby each group comprised a mixture of students across Years 7-10 or 7-12. The length of time these groups met varied greatly between schools - some meeting for 25 minutes daily and others meeting twice weekly. The content of the sessions also varied, with the morning groups incorporating administrative tasks such as roll call. However, the underlying aim was relationship building and wellbeing.

Despite such an aim, the homeroom model was not a perfect system. The success of each group was very dependent on the teacher running it to build relationships with and between the students. Indeed, as alluded to in earlier sub-sections, it was evident that the level of participation offered to students in all aspects of school life often ‘depends on the staff member’ (Head Teacher, School J), their personality and how they chose to structure their classroom: *[It depends on] experience, training, attitude, content, confidence, the class that they perceive that they have...* (Teacher, School F). In an effort to address such discrepancy, there were calls to introduce wellbeing programs into homeroom sessions to give the time more of a focus or structure. However, one principal described his concern over formalising the space and time in this way:

...[It’s] time where you’re sitting down informally with your kids, there’s nothing really happening but there’s a lot happening in terms of social engagement, in terms of discussion, in terms of “How are you going today?” ...we could just [make life] more frantic by the program that we implement. That’s what worries me. (Principal, School A).

Indeed, in schools where such a shift had been made, the approach was generally not proving popular amongst students or staff:

The purpose of homeroom is to give us an opportunity to talk to people older than us and yet we go to home group and you get told be quiet, watch this video, don't talk to him, don't get his advice because we don't have time for it, because of this very strict schedule of videos that we have to watch. (Yr 9-10, School E).

This sub-section has highlighted that, despite the growth of new structures and programs in schools, in many cases these remain largely dependant on individual staff commitment to work in a dialogic way with students. Therefore, while there is evidence of much change beginning to take place, many students' current experience of participation at school may be somewhat ad-hoc from class to class.

STUDENT CONTRIBUTION TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Throughout the above, students' experiences of participation have been discussed at the personal or school level. However, if there is a growing agenda around student participation *within* educational policy, then it would be something of an oversight for students not to participate in the *development* of educational policy.

In the student focus groups, discussion tended to centre around opportunities (or otherwise) to have a say in relation to tangible, school-based rules, such as uniform and presentation (accepted hair styles, jewellery, and shaving), with these discussions particularly prevalent in schools with very strict rules in these regards. It emerged that some schools had consulted students on new uniforms, and in others students had had input into school recycling policies or the sourcing of food for the school cafeteria (such as ingredients free from palm oil). In general though, students were a little uncertain about how they might be able to contribute to school rules or policies in a broader sense.

Correspondingly, most students did not have high expectations for participation in this regard, believing that this level of 'voice' was not available to many of their teachers, who were themselves being dictated to from 'above.' Some teachers also questioned what students might be able to offer to wider educational policy discussions, even those who had gone to lengths to involve students in this way:

I: Are students involved at all in contributing to policy? P: No, no. [Laughs]... You know... I mean it's hard enough getting teachers to involve themselves in it, who wants to write policy? (Principal, School B)

...with our three year strategic plan...we did engage quite significantly with a representative group from each of the years. Was that successful? I don't really think so. Some arguments [might] say, "Well, what do they really know about what they really want to be learning?"
(Principal, School I)

In contrast to school-based staff, most of the policymakers considered student participation to be critical to the development of policy, although they acknowledged that there were few opportunities for students to do so:

... not so long ago I wouldn't have even given it a thought that one should involve students, or even consider students in the formulation of policies which, in fact were all about them, or about what happens to them anyway... which is pretty ridiculous when you think about it! So yes, I can envisage a time, and hopefully the time is now... whereby kids'... voices are heard in terms of the development of policy. (Policymaker 8)

Some policymakers explained that student perspectives have been included in some Australian educational policy to date, although much of this has been drawn from student data about a topic (e.g. a survey on bullying) as opposed to engaging directly and explicitly with students in the development of policy. There were a few examples of more collaborative processes that had been undertaken recently and these policymakers described how such processes had

highlighted aspects they had not previously given enough consideration to, such as the way policy is rarely ‘one size fits all’ and the importance of flexibility for schools ‘to look locally at [their] own context to see what’s going to work within [their] school and [their] community’ (Policymaker 4). In addition, important learnings were gained from the process, such as the need for ‘teacherless student voice’ (Policymaker 4), how to engage young people in policy development, and issues of representation: ‘You say you’ve done it, but all you’ve done is spoken to the articulate kids...we haven’t got the iceberg that’s below it’ (Policymaker 3).

One policymaker described how they had sought to overcome issues such as representation by listening to the needs of the whole school community (including students) from the very beginning:

That policy was developed by 18 months of going out and talking to the community about what they wanted to see in the policy... a lot of other policies they are written here first of all and then they go out for consultation. Whereas we didn’t write a word. We went out and said what does it need to look like? (Policymaker 3)

It was believed that this approach offered a more ‘authentic’ process of participation, and a useful model for future policy. Policymakers also believed such approaches helped to address tensions between professional expertise and students’ capacity to advise on the wider educational process. They felt that the critical aspect of student participation in policy was to gain insight into students’ lived experiences and their perspectives on these, and use these as a starting point for developing policy that can seek to improve upon this.

Overall, it is evident that, at present, students are not widely involved in policy development, neither at a school nor at more strategic levels. However, akin to many other aspects of school life, it is evident that the process of generating educational policy is in a period of change. There is evidence of greater interest and impetus to involve students in policy development, with corresponding knowledge being generated on effective ways to do this.

Throughout this section on ‘How participation is experienced,’ it has been evident that opportunities for student participation at school are expanding across all aspects of school life – in the classroom, in activities outside of class, through the improvement of structures and systems, and even to an extent in the development of educational policy. In this regard, it is clear that schools are beginning to take up the challenge, posed by the policymakers in the opening section, to innovate and try new ideas at a grassroots level – that the ‘early adapters’ are tentatively beginning to pave the way for increased student participation.

It has also been identified that relationships, particularly student-teacher relationships, provide an important medium through which participation is facilitated in the school context. It might have been assumed that school culture would play a more considerable role in influencing the experience of student participation. However, culture – as an experience distinct from pedagogy, new programs, relationships, policy and structures – is difficult to study and articulate, particularly in the context of interviews and focus groups. The existence or absence of a participatory culture has been implicit within the narratives of students and teachers throughout the sections above, and it is clear that student participation needs to become embedded as a part of school culture - in ‘the way we do things here.’ There was evidence that this is beginning to happen, particularly in certain schools, but in general the individual contributors or innovators – the introduction of new programs or the practices of individual teachers – continue to stand out, rather than an all-permeating sense of a participatory culture. As the following principal summarises:

At the moment it’s just very much skimming the surface and we do something, “Oh that wasn’t a bad idea for engaging students,” but it’s not really embedded, it doesn’t have that well, fine-tuned and rounded approach. (Principal, School A)

4.4 PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

In many of the discussions about ‘how’ participation is experienced, participants’ responses (particularly those of students and teachers) naturally segued into the beneficial outcomes of increasing participation. Occasionally these were framed from experience, as a result of the increasing participatory practices being offered. Mainly though, the benefits were raised more speculatively – what they believed could potentially result if only participatory opportunities could continue to be expanded further. The sorts of beneficial outcomes discussed covered a wide range of concepts including notions of increased school engagement, community connection, wellbeing, attendance and improved relationships. Whilst such various aspects can be teased apart, they remain inherently intertwined, reinforcing one another in an interconnected way. In this section, in an effort to distinguish the potential benefits perceived by participants in this study, we present ideas under the following emergent headings:

- School engagement
- Relationships and the school community
- Life skills and wellbeing

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

The overwhelming message from staff and students was a belief that increasing student participation would improve student engagement, both in the school community and in schooling. Such engagement was described in terms of motivation and enjoyment of all areas of school life:

If they don’t have a say in their future and their education, then they’re going to be passengers...they’re not going to be, you know, really involved in it. Just go along for the ride and then jump off at the first available stop. But if they’re consulted, and they’ve got a say, then they’re going to engage in it more. (Teacher, School B)

There’s a cohort of kids she’s got in there who are kind of the “naughty kids” around the school. And she’s got them all as a backstage group, and they were in here all day Sunday setting up, doing all this stuff...coming in early, leaving late yesterday, today, tomorrow, doing all the stuff. They’re into it, they love it. (Principal, School D)

Students and teachers described a ‘*positive snowball*’ (Head Teacher, School E) in terms of academic engagement, whereby an increased sense of participation in almost any area of school life, would likely raise student motivation to attend school, their sense of belonging, enjoyment of lessons, commitment to their learning journey, and ultimately, their academic effort:

Slowly we’ve started to celebrate the whole child, and those kids with the gift in music or art, because more’s been learned about GATS education. We’ve probably dropped a couple of places, but not as much as one would think because by fostering those other talents that the kids have, they’re actually more inspired to work on their academia anyway. (Head Teacher, School E)

Part of this positivity seemed was connected to the increased sense of personal responsibility and control (the idea that participation involves an *active choice*):

It kind of makes you feel like you’re more in control of your own learning, like so... you’re kind of the reason that you get a better education. (Yr 7-8, School F)

It would make the students value learning instead of being forced to learn. (Yr 9-10, School A)

More directly, staff and students described that by listening to students' needs and their current conceptual understandings in the classroom, they could increase the efficiency of teaching and schooling. In addition, the participants strongly believed that through participation across school life there would be benefits in terms of school functioning:

I think [students would] respect [new changes / new rules] more if it's like a joint decision between the students and the teachers. (Yr 9-10, School C)

If kids are happy at school, then school runs well. (Principal, School F)

Engagement in school and in learning can be understood as the core aims of schools. It is perhaps for this reason that engagement arose so prominently as the key benefit discussed by students and staff, and was inextricably linked to school functioning. It is notable that the majority of these responses emerge as beliefs about participation – they are framed speculatively rather than arising from current experiences – suggesting that despite current efforts towards increased participation increased student engagement is not yet being seen.

RELATIONSHIPS AND THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Closely connected to ideas around school functioning and engagement at school were beliefs about the potential of participation for improving relationships and community building at school. Students perceived that through increased opportunities to 'have a say', teachers would come to better understand and cater for their needs: *'The teachers would understand you better and what you want and then it would be less frustrating'* (Yr 9-10, School B). In addition, they believed that through such increased communication, students would *'get to know the teachers better as well'* (Yr 7-8, School F), something that would be beneficial in terms of their perceived approachability. For students, participation was also connected to enhancing students' and teachers' ability to work together, and it was believed it would offer a greater experience of equality between students and teachers, with students regularly reasserting the way participation would help them feel recognised as an 'individual', a 'human being', as 'someone'.

Both students and staff then described how such improved relationships might then reinforce a cycle of communication and participation: *'By asking for opinions and ideas, it gives the students a feeling of worth, which will help them to participate at school more'* (Yr 9-10, School H). As such, participation was connected to building a sense of community, something described in terms of belonging and ownership:

The school community becomes more active and feels a bit more welcome because it doesn't feel like a dictatorship... (Yr 9-10, School H)

To make them feel important, to make them feel valued, have a sense of ownership and belonging. It's their school, not our school, you know? If we don't consult them or involve them, there's no emotion, there's no love, there's no feeling. So you might as well do an online course, rather than come to school. So if we don't involve them, they won't involve themselves. (Teacher 4, School A)

One of the student focus groups considered whether their school could be considered a community at present: *'I think it is a community, but we're just... - like we were saying earlier, not as enthusiastic'* (Yr 9-10, School F). The implication seems to be that through increased opportunities to participate, ownership and connection to the community might increase; through increased participation the students' enthusiasm towards the community might improve:

People might be more willing to like cooperate in activities and like do them because they've input into it. (Yr 7-8, School C)

You're like more interested in what's happening. If you get to make the decision you're interested in it, but if the teacher's gonna make the decision you're like, "Well, I don't care about it." (Yr 9-10, School B)

One teacher shared an example of when such positive results had been seen:

The new group of seniors, they lobbied, and they got a petition, and they...booked a meeting with the Principal, and they went and stated their case. And they had their first dance party last term, and it was a huge success, and there was not one incident. So that's student voice for you. (Head Teacher, School E)

Overall then, it was evident that by having the opportunity to participate, students and staff believed that their relationships with one another could be strengthened and a sense of community fostered. This, in turn, would reinforce the scope and opportunity for student participation further, creating a positive cycle around engagement, connection and community.

LIFE SKILLS AND WELLBEING

So far, the benefits of participation have been discussed largely on a school-wide basis – increased engagement across the student body and the development of a sense of community amongst students and teachers. Although discussed a little less prevalently, staff and students also believed that increasing opportunities for student participation would offer a range of benefits for individual students, including the development of life skills and personal wellbeing.

The life skills described included competencies that go beyond academic or subject-based knowledge, such as communication, conflict resolution, reasoning, emotional intelligence and negotiation. It was broadly believed that the process of participation would offer students greater opportunity to learn, practice and hone these skills:

Being able to appropriately address issues. Having more skills in their tool bag than jumping up and down and stomping their feet or swearing. (Principal, School C)

It gets them to be thoughtful. It gets them to be leaders. It gets them to be proactive and not reactive. It gives them experience of disappointment, success. (Principal, School G)

Participants described the benefits such skills might offer students in day-to-day school life, as well as in their future lives, including in relation to fostering the skills to be self-motivated, lifelong learners.

Teachers also believed that participation could play a role in improving mental health:

You'd have less anxiety and depression elevation...it's more about the...whole person rather than necessarily you're an A and you're a B and you're a C. (Teacher, School F)

To keep them informed...I think it makes them less anxious about things, less anti about some things, more trusting...all of those sort of things, and I think that's psychologically and emotionally better for them. (Head Teacher, School C)

Therefore, closely connected to the development of life skills were links between participation and aspects of wellbeing, including confidence and the sense of self-esteem that arises from knowing one's opinion is valued:

Just that sense of worth that they can make a difference and that confidence to actually suggest or give opinion and it's gonna be heard. (Teacher, School C)

Feeling better about yourself - good self-esteem. (Year 9-10, School A)

Similarly, woven throughout the student narratives (and identifiable in the student engagement sub-section above) was the assertion that through 'having a greater say' students would feel happier at school:

Students' wellbeing will change, may want to come to school not be forced and be a lot happier. (Year 9-10, School B)

This section has focused on presenting the benefits that participants perceived would arise from increased student participation – with it noted that many of these benefits were speculative with only a few examples evident to date. The benefits raised are interconnected and somewhat cyclical with outcomes including increased student engagement, improved relationships and sense of community and improved wellbeing. These are not new concepts; these are well-worn beliefs in the literature. Yet, what is interesting to note is that there is such consistency in these beliefs between students and staff in the cross-section of NSW schools involved, despite differences in how they conceived of the concept of student participation.

4.5 BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

In addition to the benefits of participation, participants were also asked about the barriers to participation at their school. These barriers likely partly account for why the above potential benefits are not being fully realised. Two main forms of barrier were raised: ‘practical’ concrete barriers such as finances, time, policy and feasibility; and ‘personal’ or ‘cultural’ barriers for both students and staff, such as attitudes and motivations towards student participation or entrenched beliefs and behaviours in the school.

PRACTICAL BARRIERS

Both staff and students placed a strong emphasis on ‘practical’ barriers and challenges that can inhibit and/or restrict participation opportunities across the school. Outside of the classroom context students and staff explained that there was limited staff time to support student participation, as well as limited funds to action students’ ideas. Time and funding can also be a limiting factor inside the classroom, with limited resources to instigate, plan and reflect upon new ways of teaching, as the following policymaker lamented: *‘I can spark the fire and...people go away...but they don’t do it...Because they get busy [so] they go back to the...dominant way of doing it’* (Policymaker 3).

In addition to issues of time and funding, when it comes to offering students opportunities for participation, whether within or out with the classroom, schools are faced with the sheer practical barrier of numbers. Participants questioned the inequalities present in choosing which voices are listened to or how decisions are made, recognising that even if the majority agree, the unhappy minority could still represent quite a significant number of students:

I: So is majority rules ok I guess is what I’m asking. Is that the best way to do it?

S: Not really [...] No, but I don’t see another way around it. (Yr 9-10, School B)

With these concerns in mind, teachers described feeling as though they were not well equipped with the skills necessary to facilitate participatory practices, particularly how to manage situations where students do not want to participate. Such concerns indicate that a lack of professional development may be a further practical barrier to improving student participation at school.

In many of the schools, it was apparent that opportunities to participate were often biased towards the older students:

Our seniors are very involved, but we have 800-900 students in our Years 7, 8, 9 and 10. And so it’s a bit of a question at the moment, how do we give those students the voice? (Assistant Principal, School A)

Notably, though, many of the younger students seemed to accept that this was the case and that they would have the opportunity to participate when they are older. Despite this, issues of representation remained, with both staff and students pointing out that it is often the most popular or articulate students, or the limited group elected to the SRC, who are heard. In addition to being heard, these students are then afforded the opportunity to learn and hone their participatory skills, further creating the divide.

As the policymakers highlighted earlier, more systemic issues, such as curriculum constraints and the compliance agenda also impact upon opportunities for student participation at school, particularly in the classroom context. This was echoed by many teachers and students, who indicated that ‘higher-up’ pressures represent a significant barrier to meaningful participation:

One of the barriers would probably be from like the Board of Studies because they make you learn all this stuff so...like there's not really that much room for student involvement because we have to do what they say. (Yr 7-8, School F)

We've got to deliver the content and try and throw...in, some high order thinking and discussing. You could do that all day long but you've got to move on to the next topic and you have to almost stop and say, "Sorry let's move on, we've got to do this, this, this"... (Teacher, School E)

Connected to this, it was also highlighted that teachers' own opportunities to participate and have a say within schools and educational policy are limited, something believed to impact upon their facilitation of student participation:

I guess the ownership of decision making would need to shift because it is very clear I think to everyone that the school rules and the policies and everything gets set by someone above me... (Teacher 2, School A)

The teachers...are really quite happy to help us in the things that we want ...I feel like you can't really blame the teachers if they stop you from doing anything because it's not the teachers it's the people above the teachers and then the people above those people. (Yr 9-10, School E)

Students recognised that for a teacher to really embrace student participation on a substantial level, it would likely require an enormous commitment to fight for change. In line with these thoughts, policymakers and school principals went beyond current policy to blame the wider education model for inhibiting the changes needed to progress participation:

[The education departments) actually have to move into this century... (Principal, School C)

I think we need to look at what is the actual purpose. The purpose for education seems to be we start here and we finish here so that we can have a job that's going to bring in the money in the future. Is that really what it's about? (Policymaker 1)

Indeed, while policymakers earlier emphasised that there is flexibility to be creative and innovate, one principal countered this, believing that the results-driven culture stifles ingenuity at a systemic level, along with schools' willingness to try new ideas because *'people are too scared that they might do something which [might have] a bad result'* (Principal, School G).

Despite the limitations raised here, it was evident from the 'How participation is experienced' section that schools are beginning to try to innovate around student participation within the constraints of the current policy environment. Nevertheless, it is clear school staff feel greater support and flexibility within curriculum and broader education policy would make it much easier for them to further improve student participation in practice. However, even if practical barriers could be overcome, entrenched attitudinal or cultural barriers might remain, as discussed below.



STUDENT ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATION

When considering the challenges for effective student participation in school, staff and students highlighted barriers around student attitudes and motivation, something embodied in the following comment: *'They're the same people every year because no one else tries out. No one else can be bothered I suppose' (Yr 9-10, School G)*. From the student perspective, a range of motivational reasons were cited for such negative attitudes. There was sometimes an implicit notion that participation is not 'cool' or goes *'against what their friends are saying'* (Yr 7-8, School F). However, generally there were deeper beliefs that participation had little effect on change, and so wasn't worth the effort. These seemed to stem both from experience, such as in the vicious cycle described in relation to SRCs, and also from perceptions about adults' views of young people's voice:

Even if we were consulted the adults probably wouldn't have valued our opinion because adults never take in to account teenagers' and children's opinions anyway. (Yr 9-10, School G)

Other students felt cautious about whether some of their peers would contribute in a mature and productive manner, worrying their actions might jeopardise the participatory opportunities for those willing to be more sensible:

One group of students suffers because the other don't know the difference between having a laugh and being ridiculous. (Yr 7-8, School F)

Although other students countered this, asserting that if it is something important enough to a student then they will contribute in a mature way:

It depends on the topic it is though, because sometimes people are like really serious, you think they're immature and then it's like, "I'm passionate about this, I'm not being immature for five seconds, just pay attention". (Yr 9-10, School I)

There were a few students who felt generally concerned about the idea of increasing student voice and influence, raising the importance of intergenerational collaboration so that things would not get 'out of hand' or too 'chaotic':

It can be good to get a say in what you want. But I think that the teachers still should guide you so it doesn't go crazy and out of hand. (Yr 7-8, School F)

Teachers and principals tended to focus on the difficulties involved in trying to rally those students who do not want to get involved. They explained that some students are involved in many areas of school life (sport, music, academic groups) – *'they have their finger in every pie... And there are others, who do nothing'* (Principal, School B). Some teachers felt that where participation was not valued or supported in the student's home life, this had an effect on the overall participation of students in their school:

The ones that don't [turn up] obviously that's supported - the argument's too hard to have at home... "Oh it's only one day, you're only doing sports carnival," but that participation message doesn't help. (Teacher, School F)

Other staff recognised that difficult home life experiences might directly influence student motivation, ability or willingness to participate at school: *'For some of them, school and rules isn't even a factor in their lives. They're dealing with too much other stuff'* (Teacher, School D).

In addition, some students and staff also pointed out that student participation is just *'not for everyone'* (Head Teacher, School C) and that there may be students who would prefer not to be actively involved. Interestingly, this idea was most often discussed outside of the staff interviews, after the recorder was switched off. Similarly, other participants indicated in the interviews or focus groups that there may be students who lack the confidence to engage in established platforms, such as the SRC, who would be daunted by being asked their opinion, or might need support to develop participatory skills:

The reality is that some students, for their own personal reasons won't...some will be seen as being people who are not participating by choice, whereas in fact it may be some other reason, that they don't have the confidence to do it, they don't like to push themselves for things like that. That's quite difficult. (Principal, School B)

It makes me feel nervous and shy, and sometimes good at the same time. (Yr 7-8, School C)

It is important to acknowledge that it is highly likely that there were other students who did not contribute much during the focus groups, who may have also felt the same way about student participation.

STAFF ATTITUDINAL OR CULTURAL BARRIERS

The policymakers believed that at present there is varying commitment towards student participation amongst school staff: *'Dare I say it...we've got teachers who very much understand this, but we've also got cohorts of teachers that don't'* (Policymaker 1). The beliefs and assumptions that arose in the principal and teacher interviews confirmed this to be the case. Dominant societal conceptualisations of young peoples' capabilities, such as that teenagers are lazy, or disinterested in participation, or children and young people are unpredictable and unable to know their own minds, were evident in some staff narratives: *'Kids don't always know their own minds, they don't always have the ability to articulate their thoughts...'* (Principal, School B).

Along similar lines, one teacher questioned whether the current agenda towards increasing student participation was a natural consequence of adolescence rather than a broader 'struggle' for the recognition of students as a social group:

Every generation of young people has always felt like they don't have enough say in things. I wonder whether part of it is growing up. We start to get more say over our decisions as we grow up. That's a natural progression and we always want to be a bit further ahead than what we are. (Teacher 2, School A)

This neglects to recognise the marginalisation of children and young people as a social group, something particularly critical to challenge in schools given that they are the most universal institution in young people's lives.

Related to this, a further important nuance emerged. In addition to making the overarching broad spectrum changes to culture, pedagogy and practice so that students, as a key stakeholder group, have greater opportunities to participate, schools may have to re-visit some degree of this power and dialogic 'struggle' with each new year group, as part of their personal learning, growth and development. Indeed, it did not seem to always be explicitly understood that student participation is an on-going process - it is the act and the process of being involved that makes participation meaningful, not that other students were involved at some other point in time. When this is misunderstood, it can serve to reinforce ideas that young people are unpredictable and that student 'voice' is fickle.

... it's almost like if it wasn't that student or that year group then they're not interested. So if it was...Year 12 from three or four years ago that decided something, they feel like that's not current. (Teacher 1, School A)

Therefore, some staff felt justified in placing teachers' professional expertise over student voice:

Although I think it's important that kids get a say. I also think there's some decisions that you know, our professional opinion - what we know can get certain things out of students - is more important, for us to just drive in that direction as opposed to giving them an option. (Head Teacher, School F)

At other times, staff demonstrated evidence of apprehension around participation, describing the need for there to be limitations on what or how much students are able to contribute:

You don't want to open up a Pandora's box where you have a system that's run by kids and staff. You've got to have that cut off line...I still believe there's a lot of things where they could have a lot of say in... but the fine line is, where does it stop? (Head Teacher, School D)

Students also perceived this to be an issue, describing that teachers may be *'scared to let students have too much of a say'* (Yr 9-10, School I). Indeed, in addition to challenging societal beliefs about young people, it was clear that participation challenges teachers' sense of authority – *'Their classroom, their kingdom kind of thing'* (Teacher, School H).

The policymakers discussed their role as being to *'recalibrate everybody'* (Policymaker 5), asserting that they must help schools *'make the shift'* (Policymaker 1) to placing the student at the centre of schooling. However, it was also recognised that adopting more participatory approaches (specifically personalised learning approaches) requires confidence and a *'leap of faith'*:

As far as teaching goes... it takes a lot of confidence to feel that they know that curriculum innately, they know the needs of the child innately and they can let it go ... that you can individualise the instructions based on the needs of the child...it does take a bit of that leap of faith to actually move from a teacher directed approach... (Policymaker 1).

The policymakers and senior staff acknowledged that the constant educational reform can make teachers tired of change and wary of taking such 'leaps'. They recognised that a mentality of resistance to change can develop, and teachers *'default back, "Oh this is what I was taught as a kid, so if I do that I'm doing the right thing"'* (Principal, School F). Therefore, senior staff described the challenge of maintaining the enthusiasm of staff to continue to strive for increased participatory practices:

So the challenge for me is to maintain the momentum that we established, and keep dusting it off and reminding people this is what we want to do... Cause the last thing you want is for all that to drop off, because once they drop off it's hard to get them going again.
(Principal, School D)

As the earlier section on *'How participation is experienced'* indicated, it is clear that commitment to student participation varies from teacher to teacher and school to school. This section has shed light upon the sorts of attitudinal barriers that might be responsible for this variation.

Despite the above barriers, there has been evidence in the data thus far that schools are making some headway towards new structures and initiatives to improve the facilitation of student voice. Whilst there is considerable room for improvement, this suggests the voice of young people as a social group is slowly becoming better recognised in schools. On an individual level though, it is the process of participation that is important, more than the fact that other young people and teachers were previously involved in reaching a compromise. Indeed, schools need to be prepared, through their structures, pedagogy and practice, to facilitate the participatory journey of the each new cohort of young people. This places the impetus upon adults at school to afford opportunities across all aspects of school life and to support students to develop the skills and confidence to actively participate in these. In turn, through this on-going process, not only will individual students benefit, but deeper learning and understandings will also arise for schools, such that the recognition of students as a social group will also continue to be driven forward and structures and systems will be continually rechallenged anew. Understanding the dual nature of the current *'struggle'* for participation – as being about increased recognition of students as a social group, and about personal learning and growth - is critical for considering how to overcome the barriers to improve the facilitation of student participation at school.

4.6 IMPROVING PARTICIPATION AT SCHOOL

It is evident from the data presented so far that there is interest in improving student participation across all areas of schooling, with evidence of a range of new ideas and initiatives being trialled. Yet, it is clear there remains considerable scope for improvement. Students and staff were invited to share their thoughts on how the facilitation of student participation could be improved and a wide range of ideas arose. In analysing these for emergent themes, we were able to identify key steps by which schools might practically and realistically move forward to improve student participation at school. These ideas have been refined further and translated for practice into a Good Practice Guide for schools, see: bit.ly/ParticipationStudy

Below, we similarly present the data under practical and increasingly expansive themes:

- Asking students what they would like to contribute to
- Considering how to better facilitate participation
- Maintaining on-going communication
- Supporting students' participatory skills
- Considering participation in the classroom
- Creating a community that works together
- Developing a culture of student participation
- Professional development
- Systemic change

It will be noted that these encompass participation both within and outwith the classroom, aligning with the student and teachers' broad understandings and experiences of participation at school.

ASKING STUDENTS WHAT THEY WOULD LIKE TO CONTRIBUTE TO

In considering how the facilitation of student participation could be improved across schools, teachers and students pointed to the importance of participation being relevant to students. The first step in this regard, which was highlighted by both students and staff, is to **begin by asking students what they would like to contribute to**. This would particularly help in terms of raising opportunities for voice and influence outside of the classroom.

There was a note of caution around this from some staff though, who felt there is little to be gained from gathering students' views on aspects of school life they cannot influence (such as curriculum). In this sense, there was an indication across many staff narratives that recognising where the limits of participation are, is an important way of ensuring student participation is authentic and meaningful. However, staff were often referring to the identification of boundaries, since it was assumed that students might have unrealistic expectations and, as a student body, have unrelenting demands. Despite such assumptions, students tended to couch their desires for increased participation in quite realistic terms, and within the boundaries of existing school norms, expectations and processes:

Obviously not all suggestions can be implemented and rules and teachers often know better, but some suggestions are very intelligent and worth taking on board. (Yr 7-8, School F)

Asking students what they would like to contribute to, starts the conversation with students, and offers scope for discussion around what might be possible. Connecting to the notion that each cohort of young people partakes in a journey of participatory development, it would seem likely that it is important to regularly ask students what they would like contribute to – for instance at the start or end of each school year or term. This would give each new group a regular voice, and allow the school community to be responsive to new issues as they arise.

CONSIDERING HOW TO BETTER FACILITATE PARTICIPATION

Building upon the sub-section above, in addition to asking students what they would like to contribute to, **it is important to consider how to gather students' views.** It was largely unanimous amongst students that most current SRC and leadership structures were tokenistic and unrepresentative. Instead, students offered a range of ideas for how their views could be better gathered. This included surveying students, ballot systems and, in particular, various types of open student forums. What was notable was an inclination towards platforms that allow all students to contribute – or at least to listen to and to be aware of others' contributions. A lack of communication and feedback between student representatives and the wider student body was one of the key critiques of current SRC models. Therefore, more open platforms might help some way towards resolving this issue, as well as tackling pervasive concerns around representative voice, and provide opportunities for all students to have the chance to learn or be exposed to participatory skills.

Whilst students placed a strong emphasis on access for all, they recognised that it might not always be feasible to consult with all students. Students and staff suggested it might be better, in such cases, to allow interested groups of students to put themselves forward, *'the floating SRC type thing... So it's engaging [different groups of] students in what they're interested in rather than having [one] representative body'* (Principal, School G). Indeed, there was little support from students for the idea of selecting a few students to permanently be a conduit for all student participation.

It is also important to highlight the strong emphasis in the students' suggestions around direct dialogue and communication between teachers and students. This arose time and again in relation to all different aspects of participation, with an emphasis on building shared communication that is genuine and open:

Meet every so often to talk about ways to like fix problems...and that would be with the Principal so kids would also have an understanding of what he wanted. (Yr 7-8, School E)

Despite this strong emphasis on dialogue, there were some students who advocated for more anonymous means of participation. Sometimes students sought anonymity from staff, and sometimes from fellow students:

Be like anonymous so nobody would know who it was. (Yr 7-8, School B)

So it's private and only teachers know. (Yr 7-8, School A)

This dichotomy in the student narratives serves to indicate that a combination of methods is likely necessary for accessing a range of views from different students and in relation to different issues. In addition, it would likely be important to consult regularly with students on whether processes or models for gathering their views are working, and to approach this with the participatory journey of each year group of young people in mind. This might help prevent models becoming overused, out-dated or from slipping into a negative rut as was the case for many existing SRCs across the schools.

MAINTAINING ON-GOING COMMUNICATION

Having asked students what they would like to contribute to or change, how they would like to contribute, and providing a range of ways to do this, **it is critical that student participation and involvement continues and is maintained.** However, as the earlier section, 'Barriers to participation,' highlighted, the practicality of numbers can make decision-making difficult in schools; it is impossible to meet the needs of all students and staff.

Whilst this is not easy to resolve, the sorts of open, shared communication advocated by many of the students can offer a platform for discussing the practical reality of the likes of majority voting. As some students pointed out: *'Some people will always like disagree but at least they'll have a say in it'* (Yr 9-10, School F). Indeed, a critical change in improving the facilitation of participation at school is to improve communication around decisions arising from student advice – continuing to privilege shared communication throughout the process. Students recognised that there are times when their views or advice can't be acted upon, but perceived it was important that principals and teachers report back to students on decisions that had been taken and why - *'not just leave it to rumours or Chinese whispers'* (Yr 9-10, School G). This was the area where there was the strongest resonance between the assertions of students and staff:

It might be a no, but the requests are taken seriously, and they're given a reason, and that makes a difference. (Principal, School B)

It is clear here that the impetus for maintaining this on-going communication lies with decision-making staff. In essence then, it emerges that staff must actively engage in the process of participation and take responsibility to help drive it forward. Outside of the classroom this might include coordinating the allocation of time for participation, coordinating and communicating the development of a plan, and ensuring progress is monitored and communicated. Essentially, *'the teacher needs to be the one that's going to stick to the plan'* (Teacher 3, School A). Whilst this may seem an additional burden upon staff, meaningful participation is unlikely to result if staff do not take on this responsibility. Framing it in educational terms – facilitating the participatory learning of each group of young people (along with connections to wellbeing) – might help it to fit better with school and teacher priorities and encourage an approach that might allow for a shift in some of the responsibilities to students over time.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS' PARTICIPATORY SKILLS

Closely linked to the sub-section above is the need for schools, and more specifically staff, to **take on the responsibility for helping students to develop their participatory skills**, a point relevant across all aspects of school life (within and outwith the classroom). Students believed that part of this simply requires encouragement:

Run a program to encourage student participation, without any put-downs, to make it feel like it's a good, safe thing to do. (Yr 9-10, School G)

They also indicated that part of this may be derived from staff modelling participatory involvement in the more fun and informal aspects of school life:

When we do like fun things at school like bubble soccer...if the teacher or the Principal like played as well and had fun I think everyone would think of it as a fun thing to do and more people would get involved. (Yr 9-10, School F)

There were some students who suggested that students should be rewarded for their participation. However, those who spoke from experience countered such suggestions, with it felt that the likes of leadership celebration ceremonies contributed to the process of participation becoming tokenised.

In general, the support needed for the development of students' participatory skills was described in more relational terms, as enabling students to make mistakes, learn, practise and grow their skills to participate fully and effectively at school. Both students and school staff described this, with a level of resonance neither group seemed to expect:

Let them have a few things their own way and be able to change a few things (not too dramatically). (Yr 7-8, School B)

I think to pick things at the start that are doable. Kids might have big dreams but it's better for them to have a couple of successes before you start chasing things that might fall over. (Teacher 3, School A)

Despite this resonance, there was still some reticence and, occasionally, veiled resistance from some teachers and principals who expected students' ideas to fail, and hence to *'learn from their mistakes'* (Head Teacher, School B) or to take the high ground with *'well... it hasn't worked, might be time to listen'* (Principal, School B). This points again to deeply entrenched views and assumptions surrounding the capabilities of students and the position of students as a social groups within schools. In contrast, several staff described the role of schools in facilitating students' learning around participation in less conditional terms:

We'd need to transition them from not making decisions to being good decision-makers. Because if you give them choice and they're not good decision-makers then we're doing them a disservice. But if we're giving them a skill and teaching them how to make good decisions and then giving them the responsibility and freedom at the same time. (Teacher 2, School A).

A commitment to supporting students to develop and grow their skills is critical to the functioning of student participatory processes in practice. This is an aspect that will take time, and requires being revisited with each new cohort of students. Nevertheless, as has been previously highlighted throughout the ‘What are the benefits’ section, investment in this, as a component of participation more broadly, is likely to have multiple benefits for students and schools, including in the core business area of school engagement and academic learning.

CONSIDERING PARTICIPATION IN THE CLASSROOM

The sub-sections above have largely worked from a conception of participation as voice and influence and in relation to school matters and the school community beyond the classroom setting. Given policymakers’ dominant ideas around participation, perhaps most of the upcoming policy guidance will relate to participation within in the classroom setting. Nevertheless, the students and teachers in this study offered some insights to consider alongside this.

Overwhelmingly, the students advocated for curriculum content to be delivered in more ‘fun’ ways, to help create ‘positive learning environments’ (Yr 9-10, School G). Staff highlighted that taking an enjoyable and engaging approach may increase avenues for dialogue and relationship-building, as the following teacher highlights:

I might be seen more as an approachable teacher. I’m not just standing up the front all the time. I’ve got them working in individual groups on projects and I can come around and talk one on one. (Teacher, School E)

In addition to learning being ‘fun’, staff and students believed that while they had little control over the content of the curriculum this could be pitched in more relevant or ‘real world’ contexts. Some of the teachers highlighted the way in which this might help not only facilitate engagement, but also foster dialogue and develop a sense of student participation:

I do think that more emphasis has to be put on the student-centred learning, because...if they don’t see value or a point of what they’re learning beyond I should get good grades... a lot of kids will disengage and not be too concerned about the whole process.
(Teacher, School H)

That’s where the kids become part of the conversation...they can ask questions like, “Why are we learning this? What do we use this for?” ...I think it’s important.
(Head Teacher, School D)

To be able to address such questions, and cater learning to individuals interests, some teachers believed, ‘*There needs to be some sort of autonomy there that I can do what’s best for [the needs of the kids in my class]*’ (Head Teacher, School I). Where project / problem based learning approaches were in operation, these received strong support from staff and students. Such approaches are not necessarily the ‘best’ or only approach to offering a greater sense of participation in learning. However, in the context of this study, they emerged as one way that appeared to be working well in the schools in which they were operating, and to be of considerable interest to other NSW schools in the study.

CREATING A SCHOOL COMMUNITY THAT WORKS TOGETHER

Throughout the data, emphasis was often placed on the importance of developing a school community that not only supports student participation but also provides students with a sense of belonging and connectedness. Overwhelmingly, across all of the student focus groups, there was a strong emphasis that to improve participation the school community needed to be ‘fun’ to be a part of – that for students to want to become more involved, schools needed to become places of ‘fun’ rather than duty or drudgery:

Like every year get an end of year camp to look forward to. Like maybe up to Year 10 you’d make it a bonding thing and then Year 10 onwards you’d make it like an actual fun thing to do. (Yr 9-10, School G)

Students particularly sought more universal activities outside of class believing these provided good opportunities for students to have fun and to build the relationships with staff and peers across different year groups that are integral to community:

...the more you communicate the more you understand and the more friendlier the atmosphere becomes and the friendlier the environment. (Yr 9-10, School E)

Having more fun, universal activities was much less emphasised by staff, who perhaps believed schools already provide a wide repertoire of such activities. However, some schools had made providing universal, social activities for staff and students a priority, fundraising to ensure everyone could attend. For instance, twice per year one school took the whole school community *'out to do something extraordinary'* designed to challenge them *'intellectually...physically and...socially'* (Principal, school C). Through these events they looked for changes in students' willingness to challenge themselves, *'to get in and have a go'* and support peers, even those students they may not necessarily know or get along well with. The implication was that through such fun activities, the relational connections and sense of community central to participation are fostered. The principal enthused, *'what we're seeing is a real growth in students' wellbeing'* (Principal, School C).

This particular initiative seemed to have been driven by the principal and the integral role of the principal in the development of a sense of community was recurrent assertion from many students and staff in the study. Across almost every focus group at every school the students suggested that to foster a greater sense of community the principal needs to be more visible, approachable and to interact with students more:

Get engaged with the school students and what they do so they feel welcome to share and discuss problems or activities about the school. (Yr 9-10, School F)

Principals and teachers couched this in terms of the importance of leadership:

The change will only occur through the principal. It won't occur through governments, it won't necessarily occur through [education departments]. (Principal, School H)

Some staff described the principal's role as being a collaborative leader and a facilitator of participation for staff as well as students:

We might feel like a strong leader always makes the call and makes the decision, but maybe we need effective and collaborative leadership of how to bring a team of people towards a common goal. (Teacher 1, School A)

For teachers unable or unwilling to come on board, the message an implicit message was apparent – it was time to move on. They were (or soon would be) no longer a part of 'how we do things around here':

...you know I think if you have a critical mass on board, and you spend your time supporting that critical mass then the others will either come on board or find themselves employment elsewhere. (Principal, School B)

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION

Closely linked to community is the development of a culture of student participation across the school, whereby student participation is valued and seen as an integral part of school functioning by all members of the community. Staff in schools recognised for their participatory efforts ('lighthouse' schools) described some of the mindset shifts they had made that might help contribute to such change:

I think back to the day it would be this is "my" classroom, these are "my" posters, these are "my" kids... not ok this is "our" school, this is "our" community, we're gonna work together to get the best out of the kids. I think that's probably the biggest thing. (Head Teacher, School H)

In other schools, the need for cultural change was discussed, and some staff discussed the student issues that would need to be addressed to help achieve such change:

I think we need to make it part of the culture, whereby it's not embarrassing... we need to change the stigma of participation. There's so many times that kids won't put their hand up, or won't stand up for an award, or won't get involved because of what other the other kids would do, think, or say about them. We need to change that. (Teacher 4, School A)

However, as earlier data has highlighted, it was commonly acknowledged that the most challenging mindset shifts would need to be made by school staff: *'That's where that sort of leap is required...'* (Principal, School A).

Specifically, two mindset shifts emerged as critical for student participation to be realised: being willing to relinquish control and accepting the reality that students are experts on their own learning needs. Both of these are evident within the following narrative:

It's hard because we're adults and we think we're an expert. We are an expert on our knowledge, but we're not an expert of the child and how they want to learn at times. (Teacher, School E).

Some staff suggested that the best way to achieve cultural shifts might be to start small, such as with the new *'Year 7 and work it through so it becomes part of the culture'* (Head Teacher, School I). However, the majority of participants believed there needed to be a whole school approach, starting with the principal, echoing the sub-section above. It was believed that principals need to be able to *'convinc[e] staff about the importance of voice, not to feel threatened by student advocacy'* (Principal, School A), and also to *'reinforce...by example'* (Principal, School B). Through leadership, principals need to encourage staff to be genuinely and wholly open-minded and to support the efforts so as to foster professional confidence:

It's just an open mind and...a fair bit of trust there too - that needs to be there to open up and give that full respect, "Ok, here's these kids having a say, what can I do with that?" (Teacher, School C)

One teacher highlighted that teachers may not be very good at admitting if things aren't going well, and as such may not seek and share information amongst colleagues around these sorts of issues:

Our best resources are each other, but I don't think we use each other well as teachers. The person with the most information sits next to you and sometimes people are maybe stubborn or don't want to admit that they're having trouble and things. I think that could be a problem. (Teacher, School G)

One of the 'lighthouse' schools had approached this problem by establishing 'professional learning teams'. These comprised groups of five or six teachers timetabled to meet regularly and discuss and progress their learning on a different topic or focus each term. Staff at this school described how students' views also formed an important part of their professional learning processes:

They actually... had interviewed a number of students about different aspects of [a] project and videoed it and we as a staff watched that, so we're actually directly hearing that feedback on what they thought about different things and what they understood about different things... (Teacher, School H)

Yet, regardless of the topic of discussion, it seems likely that such processes will improve communication, relationships and support – essentially a culture of collaboration amongst teachers that may roll over into the student-teacher interactions. Professional learning around student participation specifically was also highlighted as likely to be critical to shifting mindsets, as explored in the next sub-section.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development may be a critical tool in helping to shift mindsets in school towards greater understanding of the importance of student participation, recognition of the implicit and entrenched beliefs that can constrain it, as well as practical advice on facilitating student participation in practice. Both students and teachers recommended that teachers should be trained or attend workshops if student participation is going to improve:

Put teachers through lessons that show them how to interact with students and social 'okays.' (Yr 9-10, School C)

Upskilling staff in how to actually facilitate [participation]. I'm almost certain that most teachers would like to be doing more of it because they know how powerful it is but when we go to do that we don't always feel like it goes well. (Teacher 2, School A)

It was notable that schools who had made the shift to project / problem based learning approaches also seemed to have placed a high priority on professional development, with teachers in one school undertaking *'roughly 100 hours of professional development a year'* (Principal, School H). Almost all of the staff meetings at one school had been converted into professional development time, and while not all of this was directly related to student participation, a large portion surrounded reflecting and critiquing their progress, including in relation to the realisation of a more student-centred learning environment.

Most participants across the schools proposed that either the principal or an outside entity should conduct professional development on student participation. Other participants felt that students themselves were well placed to contribute to this sort of professional learning, particularly in relation to feedback on the effectiveness of teaching and learning. As earlier data highlighted, seeking and accepting student feedback can be daunting for teachers. However, as the following teacher asserts, this has to be approached as a part of the on-going professional learning journey:

The most valuable piece of learning you could do for you own teaching: ...Ask students to give you feedback on how this teaching or this learning unit went. (Head Teacher, School G)

Formal models for this, such as the approach discussed earlier in which trained students observe classes and provide feedback to teachers, may help to build comfort in the process. This may help establish the habit more widely so that teachers and students become more confident to engage in informal, dialogical feedback as well. Indeed, it emerged that in addition to explicit professional development around participation, the introduction of new programs, such as the 'Restorative Practice Model' or 'Positive Behaviour for Learning', can be helpful in working to shift teacher mindsets without creating confrontation about existing practices.

Overall, it is likely that a combination of approaches to professional development will be most effective. However, what is clear is that the professional development of teachers towards student participation needs to be planned for and resourced within schools, including follow-up time and resources to allow teachers to try out and implement the new ideas.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The points raised so far in this final section began small: finding out what students would like to contribute to; offering a range of ways to 'have a say'; maintaining two-way conversation throughout decision-making processes; and mentoring students to support and develop their participatory skills – none of which are individually complex, nor necessarily onerous. However, embroiled within these seemingly simple steps are the realities of creating participation that feels meaningful, and the complexity of navigating the school community and culture towards an increased emphasis on student participation. Nevertheless, all of the aspects of change discussed thus far are couched largely in terms that can be integrated by schools under the current educational model, although they require considerable commitment and leadership from staff. Participants also discussed the need for more systemic changes, whether at the school, state or national level.

While many systemic changes were not easily influenced (as discussed in the earlier 'Barriers to participation' section), there were some suggestions for how to change the structure or setup of schools in ways that are possible under the current educational system:

I think some of the layout of the school would need to change... - rather than classrooms, have learning zones...so that they can be all together and have multiple staff there... which I think would give the kids more togetherness and connectedness... (Teacher, School F)

Such ideas link to the project / problem based learning approaches discussed several times previously.

Picking up on earlier points about policy development, some staff advocated that students need to be involved in the creation of new policies at state and national level:

I think it's really important that the principals and executive bodies of schools and even the (education department) start allowing kids to become leaders in a lot of policymaking... I think the kids could get involved with the ministers and say, "No, no, no, there's no use making a bullying program, this is not going to work"... (Head Teacher, school D)

It emerged that one particularly productive way to begin this might be in relation to rules or policies around technology at a school level. The technology young people use is changing at a rapid pace, and as such new rules have to evolve quickly. Often this is an area in which students are unquestionably more expert than their teachers. In addition, once the general procedures of student participation in such matters exist, then there is on-going scope for new cohorts of students starting school to contribute to evolving rules and decisions around technology usage at school. Therefore, while it might be some time before systemic change to the aims or structure of education become truly 'reformed', this offered a key way by which schools can innovate and drive change from a grassroots level.

The insights across this section point to a breadth of changes required to improve student participation across all areas of schooling. Whilst collectively this could appear to require such substantial systemic changes that it would seem insurmountable in the current environment, the above analysis has highlighted that a series of small steps can be taken to progress change at a grassroots level in schools.



5. DISCUSSION

The data presented above has offered insight into Research Question 2 (RQ2): how students, teachers, principals and policymakers currently understand participation and how it is experienced in NSW schools. It has highlighted differences in how student participation is understood, particularly between policy staff and the students, staff and principals on the ground in schools. It has demonstrated a broad range of arenas in which student participation currently occurs in schools and the changes schools are currently trying to make to progress student participation further. Barriers to this were also identified, along with the potential benefits that students, teachers and principals envisaged if student participation was more embedded within school life. Finally, findings from the data were distilled into steps for improvement that are possible within the current policy environment and educational model. Building upon these findings and analysis, three key aspects warrant further consideration here: how these findings build upon existing literature or thinking on student participation; the relevance of recognition theory; and the connection between student participation and wellbeing.

5.1 CONTRIBUTION TO EXISTING EVIDENCE

Several key points emerged that seem important to consider in the context of existing literature on student participation. These include:

- The contrast between the narrow conceptualisation of student participation held by policymakers and the broader way it is understood (and experienced) by students, teachers and principals in schools
- Recognition of the capacity building impetus for schools – schools need to commit to creating opportunities for participation and to supporting students to develop and refine their participatory skills
- The different expectations students held for their participation within and out of the classroom

These are explored through the following discussion.

The conceptual ideas of students, school staff and policymakers regarding student participation at school were collectively very broad and varied. Through closely examining the data in light of existing literature and theorisations of student participation, we sought to identify the ‘key elements’ of participation at school to inform subsequent phases of the study. As existing literature has signalled (for example, Davies et al. 2004; Thomas, 2007), many of the teachers’ ideas and the students’ initial thoughts about participation linked it to *involvement* in activities. When the students later refined their ideas, following the benefit of reflective discussion, they placed greater emphasis on being heard (as opposed to just being listened to) and greater equality between students and teachers - ideas that started to point towards important ‘elements’ of meaningful participation. Given that the teachers benefited from this reflection before being asked about participation, their emphasis on ‘involvement’ seemed rudimentary, and one that did not seem to reflect the range of participatory experiences they described at their schools. We looked more closely for what they seemed to be saying about the nature of this involvement, and came to encompass the emphasis on involvement within the notion of ‘choice’ – that participation is an active, purposeful act of involving oneself, or of being involved by another.

Following considerable analysis then, four key elements become identifiable from the collective ideas: voice, influence, choice and working together. These indicate that *meaningful* and *effective* participation involves:

- **Listening to students’ perspectives and offering opportunities for these to be heard in all aspects of school life (voice)**
- **Giving due recognition to students’ perspectives so that they effect change at school (influence)**
- **Supporting students’ capacity to actively involve themselves in all aspects of school life (choice)**
- **Intergenerational dialogue and collaboration in all aspects of school life (working together)**

As noted in the background of this report, Lundy (2007) has previously argued that reference to voice alone potentially limits and diminishes the concept of participation. While students and staff did not always explicitly make a distinction, it was evident from their experiences that some structures (such as traditional SRC models) ostensibly offered students a voice but were perceived to be decorative or tokenistic (Hart, 1992) due to having little influence. Consequently, like Lundy, it seemed important to make clear reference to both voice *and* influence, particularly given the wellbeing interests of this study (for instance it would seem unlikely that voice without influence would offer wellbeing benefits).

Identifying 'choice' as a third key element seemed to offer the opportunity to encompass both the idea of making choices (from various activities, subjects, or assignment styles etc.) as well as the deeper idea that participation is an active 'choice' to involve oneself. This latter notion has been raised previously by Fletcher (2014) in an effort to distinguish between voice and participation, describing voice as an expression and participation as a self-determined act. As signalled in the findings, while this seems to honour students' agency and competence, it can also appear to place the onus upon the student, something which may not account for the various barriers that might constrain their ability or motivation to participate meaningfully. Carrying this tension through the remainder of the data, an educational or capacity building component to participation arose.

Upon closer reflection, capacity building is pointed to in a number of the existing participation models. For instance, Lundy (2007) highlights the importance of connecting UNCRC Article 12 with Article 5, which honours children's right to receive guidance and direction from adults in the exercise of their UNCRC rights (developed further in Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). Through this work Lundy argues that adults have a duty to support children to develop informed views on issues affecting their lives and to scaffold their participation. Similarly, Mitra's (2006) notion of building students' 'capacity for leadership' contains educational implications, and is something she situates above collaborating with adults in her model (see Figure 2 earlier). Connected to these ideas, which place a level of impetus and responsibility for participation upon schools, is Shier's (2001) assertion that organisations must take responsibility for the process of participation. The findings from this study build upon this existing literature, and perhaps more clearly articulate and highlight the need for schools to take pro-active responsibility for capacity building in regard to student participation. Conceiving of participation at school in this way is critical to realising and respecting students' capacity for agency and competency – their choice to participate.

Finally, a dialogic or relational basis to participation was strongly evident throughout the findings. It was advocated by students in their assertions that participation was about greater equality between students and staff at school. It also emerged as a key medium for how effective participation can be experienced. It was tricky at times to distinguish in the participants' narratives whether they were conceiving of 'working together' as an element of participation or as a benefit of the process. Certainly, both were evident at times, and sometimes concurrently, highlighting the reciprocal nature of participation and relationships. The concept of working together resonates with the highest or most aspirational of levels most participation models (Fielding, 2001; Hart, 1992; Holdsworth, 2000; Shier, 2001). It also reinforces the current emphasis upon respectful relationships within the literature (Brasof, 2015; Fielding, 2015; Horgan et al., 2017; Mannion et al., 2015; Robinson, 2014) and longstanding calls that student participation would benefit from being better understood, not as *voice* but as intergenerational dialogue (Fielding & McGregor, 2005; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Lundy, 2007; Mannion, 2007, 2010).

The four elements of participation may appear to have been derived largely from the student and staff narratives, with little mention so far of how they connect to the policymakers' ideas around student participation at school. The narrow focus from policymakers within this study upon participation as personalised or individualised learning did contrast with the much broader range of ideas amongst students and staff. However, this concerted emphasis is perhaps not surprising given that personalised learning most closely connects to the core educational business of schools. This narrow focus would seem to represent a significant potential limitation upon the growth of opportunities for student participation, particularly in terms of participation becoming embedded within school culture more broadly. However, it does fit within the above four elements of voice, influence, choice and working together. Personalised learning can be conceived to be about offering students a voice with influence in the teaching and learning cycle, building capacity for greater student engagement and motivation in learning (choice), and, perhaps most strongly, encourages greater emphasis upon teachers and students working together to progress learning. Using this as a starting point, it would seem this vision for what participation is, and could be, could be extended across the many potential arenas for participation within school life.

It is interesting to note the expectations students' appeared to hold for the level of participation in across these various arenas. The policymakers' ideas around personalised learning would seem to be aiming for rung six of Hart's (1992) ladder (adult-initiated, shared decisions with children). This is classed as 'participation' by Hart, and is positioned fairly close to the top of the model. Interestingly in the focus groups, the students did not seem to have any higher expectations for participation in the classroom context, and seemed to be appreciative of any opportunities that resembled this form of participation even if only being able to choose from a small range of limited options. This suggests that they valued the professional expertise and knowledge of their teacher and felt comfortable with them remaining in charge of the learning process and its goals, recognised the curriculum constraints upon the classroom environment, or could not conceive of another dynamic within the extent of their educational experiences. Certainly, at this stage, they did not appear to seek any higher levels of power or participation in the classroom context.

By contrast, the students had much higher expectations for their participation in formal structures or extra-curricular contexts outside of the classroom. It was notable that students were highly critical of most of the existing SRC structures tending to label them tokenistic, which is rung three on Hart's ladder and classed by Hart as 'non-participation'. Indeed, their preferred form of participation in out of class contexts was to initiate something new (whether a novel event or an improvement or change in the school), rather than merely be involved in organising an annual event in which little scope for exerting influence was available. This desire might appear to reflect the seventh rung of Hart's ladder (child-initiated and directed). However, where activities had endured successfully, for instance the student-led youth group, presumably an operating process had become established between adults and students for the running and maintenance of the venue, while affording students scope to initiate the activities such that their sense of contribution and influence continued to feel fresh. This suggests a reconfiguration from the normal adult-child relations had taken place and a negotiation and sharing of power (Mannion, 2007, 2010). This is in line with students' repeated desires for more equal standing between students and teachers - for greater intergenerational dialogue and collaboration in school life (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Thomas, 2012).

This analysis of student expectations in different spaces suggests that students may experience a range of 'levels' of participation (levels of autonomy or power) as meaningful, with this depending on the context. Fielding (2001) has previously suggested this, and this study offers greater insight into how and why this might be the case. It will be important to explore this idea further in subsequent phases of the study to consider how participation (and which key elements of it) might facilitate wellbeing in different areas of school life.

5.2 RELEVANCE OF RECOGNITION THEORY

Recognition theory was a key component of the theoretical framework guiding this study. However, it is important to critically consider the relevance and applicability of the theory in terms of the data gathered. Several key themes from the data indicate that notions of recognition are important to better understanding and improving the practice and experience of participation at school. These include:

- The emphasis on relationships – relationships emerged as an important medium or context for student participation
- The strong connection students made between participatory processes and feeling recognised as 'human beings'
- The resonance of the concept of 'struggle' to the student participation agenda

As mentioned above, the emphasis on relationships was recurrent throughout the data. In addition, the focus on relationship was particularly prominent in participants' framing of the cycle or 'positive snowball' of benefits they perceived would arise from improving participation at schools, something that echoes existing literature (Brasof, 2015; de Róiste et al. 2012; Horgan et al., 2017; Mannion, Sowerby, & l'Anson, 2015; Robinson, 2014). At a basic level this emphasis upon relationships resonates with Honneth's (1995) conceptualisation that relationships are the key site within which personal and social recognition are realised.

With this in mind, it is notable that the relationship that received by far the most attention from staff and students was the importance of egalitarian and respectful student-teacher relationships. This indicates the gatekeeping role adults play in schools over the participation of young people, something that influences the recognition of young people as a social group and, to some extent at least, the identity formation of individual young people in the school context.

In considering Honneth's three strands of recognition theory (being cared for, respected and valued), the previous 'Wellbeing in Schools' study found that students, and particularly staff, were most conversant in notions of being 'cared for' and least conversant in the concept of being 'valued' (Graham et al., 2014). In the data presented here, being 'cared for' is mentioned only briefly. Instead, notions of respect, but particularly being valued emerges much more prominently, with both students and staff believing that meaningful participation signals respect and value that helps instigate and fuel the positive cycle of benefits they perceived participation offers. This phase of the study would seem to suggest that it is through feeling valued that participation may exert the greatest wellbeing benefits, something that will be tested further in later phases of the study.

The notion of *struggle* was clearly identifiable in the data, something Honneth (1995) conceptualises as a critical part of the process in moving towards a situation where powerless or minority groups (such as children and young people) are afforded due recognition. The notion of struggle is central to the student participation agenda, which challenges long established educational norms and school hierarchy (Mannion, 2007; 2010). It was clear in the data that this 'struggle' is felt at many levels, at a personal level in terms of attitude and mindset, as well as at a more systemic level in terms of the educational model, societal expectations and the policy environment. Most of the data pertained to the struggle for recognition of young people as a social group, and it was evident across the schools collectively that some in-roads are being made in this regard. Despite this, the data also indicated that schools will likely always have to navigate the self-actualisation (or personal struggle for recognition) of individual young people. Part of this connects to schools' educational or capacity building role in facilitating participatory opportunities for each cohort of young people. Whilst new structures and programs are vital, and offer potential longevity of change, teachers need to be prepared to offer this support at a relational level and remain open and flexible to supporting the participatory learning of new school cohort of students (as well as to learn from this process themselves (Mannion, 2010)). Given the subjective nature of wellbeing (Coombes et al., 2013; de Róiste et al. 2012), it is perhaps this personal journey (or struggle) that may most readily influence student wellbeing.

5.3 WELLBEING

The overall aim of the 'Improving wellbeing through student participation at school' research was to investigate claims that student participation promotes positive outcomes for students' social and emotional wellbeing (Coombes et al., 2013; de Róiste et al. 2012). It was evident in the findings that students and staff echoed these claims, although much of this derived from belief and perception, rather than experience. The resonance between the beliefs of the students and staff seemed to be unexpected by either group, but indicates that something of a shared vision already exists, which would seem to represent an important starting point for improving participation. There was also a degree of resonance between this shared vision and the policymakers' narratives, with notions of student engagement and lifelong learning implicit within their rationale for increasing emphasis on personalised learning. That the benefits of the vast majority of research participants were framed in terms of *belief* rather than *experience*, means that at this stage any connection between participation and wellbeing can only be speculative. However, the results provide a strong basis for the following phases of this study and, the speculative nature in particular, underscores the need for and importance of a validated survey tool that can measure this connection (as developed in Phase 3 and administered in 4, see project reports for these phases).

6. SUMMARY

Across the participants in this study, there was little clarity regarding the concept of student participation, particularly on the ground in schools. Despite this, most schools were seeking to offer increased opportunities for students to ‘participate’ – they were ‘innovating at a grassroots level’ - and a wide range of approaches and initiatives were being implemented across the ten secondary schools in this study. Through these efforts, participation experiences were being extended to students across many aspects of school life: through the revitalisation of structured approaches such as SRCs; in relation to many aspects of the teaching and learning cycle; in the extra-curricular space; informally through conversation and relationships at school; and sometimes in relation to the development of some policies (mainly at the school level). The breadth of these experiences, in tandem with the findings from the Phase 1 policy analysis, reinforce that student participation is increasingly on the agenda in schools. However, students’ experiences of participation remain largely ad-hoc, being linked to specific programs or reliant upon the approach or commitment of individual teachers. Further, despite considerable resonance amongst school-based participants regarding the benefits of improved participation, these benefits are largely framed speculatively, with little experience or evidence of them in most schools to date. Therefore, it emerged that despite the considerable efforts within schools, the enduring lack of clarity over what participation *is* continues to undermine participation efforts, creating a disparity in expectations and obscuring the essential pre-conditions for meaningful and effective participation.

In an effort to identify a platform for shared understanding around student participation, four key elements of participation were identified through the analysis. These elements underline that meaningful and effective participation is about: listening to students’ perspectives (voice); recognising these perspectives and the opportunities therein to effect change at school (influence); supporting students to be actively involved in decision making within school life (choice); and intergenerational dialogue and collaboration in the school community (working together). Collectively, these offer schools a simple framework by which to consider and progress student participation efforts in the different spaces of school life (with further guidance available through the Good Practice Guide for schools generated from this study, see: bit.ly/ParticipationStudy)

Most prominent amongst the four key elements is the latter, in that the other elements of participation across all spaces within school life implicitly or explicitly pointed to the importance of trusting, respectful relationships for scaffolding students’ meaningful, authentic participation. Positive, authentic intergenerational dialogue is critical to overcoming the on-going barriers to participation, to building student and teacher confidence towards student participation, and to facilitating the recognition of students, both as a social group and individually. In addition, previous research would suggest that the relational context is likely central to the realisation of the potential wellbeing benefits of student participation (Graham et al., 2014) (an aspect statistically tested in the later phases of this research). In summarising Phase 2 then, the findings suggest that without due attention to the foundational role relationships play in building the conducive cultural conditions for participation, the considerable efforts schools are making in putting programs and structures in place to support participation will not realise their full potential.



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APPENDIX A: RESEARCH INVITATION LETTER FOR SCHOOLS

Research project: Improving wellbeing through student participation at school

We are inviting you to participate in an important research project that will identify how schools support student participation and whether this benefits student wellbeing. The research will provide schools and school systems with knowledge about models and practices that promote student participation at school. A practical outcome of the study will be a reliable and valid survey tool that schools can use to monitor their performance in relation to student participation.

Who is conducting the research?

The research is being led by the Centre for Children & Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University in partnership with the Catholic Schools Office Lismore, the NSW Department of Education and Communities, the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (formerly NSW Commission for Children and Young People), the Australian National University, the University of Sydney and the University of Central Lancashire.

What will involvement in the study mean for your school?

We are seeking to invite a) approximately 20 students from your school to participate in focus group discussions and b) 2 teachers to participate in individual interviews. As Principal and designated leader of your school, we would also like to invite you to participate in an interview.

a) Student focus groups:

Two focus groups will be conducted at your school, each comprising approximately 10 student participants. Focus Group 1 will be a combined Year 7/8 group and Focus Group 2 will be a combined Year 9/10 group. The sessions will explore students' understandings, views and experiences of participation at school. Focus groups are expected to take no longer than 80 minutes.

b) Principal and teacher interviews:

The individual semi-structured interviews will seek principal and teacher views about student participation at school. These interviews will take approximately 30-40 minutes.

We are seeking your support in helping us to identify and recruit 20 students for the focus groups and 2 teachers for the interviews.

Involvement in the research is entirely voluntary and your school, you and participants have the right to withdraw from part, or all, of the project at any time without any consequences. With the consent of participants, focus group discussions and interviews will be audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. However, all information shared by participants will be confidential. We will not use any information that could identify participants. All data collected will be stored securely at the University. The findings will be summarised into a report (which will be made available to all participants), academic journal articles and conference presentations. Brief summaries of the findings from the interviews and focus groups will also be distributed to participating schools in late 2015. The findings from this phase of the research will be used to inform the development of an online survey for a further phase of the study.

Does this research have ethics approval?

The ethical aspects and evaluation of this study have been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (ECN-15-017) as well as by [SERAP 2015147 or relevant CEO, letter attached]. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research or the researchers, you should write to the following: Ethics Complaints Officer, Southern Cross University, PO Box 157, Lismore NSW 2480. All information is confidential and will be handled as soon as possible.

What should you do now?

To accept this invitation to be involved in the research please email me at: anne.graham@scu.edu.au

I am very happy to answer any further questions you may have regarding the research and look forward to speaking with you in the near future.

Thank you for your interest and support.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Anne Graham
Director, Centre for Children & Young People
Southern Cross University
Tel: 02 6620 3613 Email: anne.graham@scu.edu.au

APPENDIX B: PRINCIPAL AND TEACHER INTERVIEW INVITATION AND CONSENT FORM

Research project: Improving wellbeing through student participation at school

We are inviting you to participate in an important research project that will identify how schools support student participation, and whether this benefits student wellbeing. The research will provide schools and school systems with knowledge about models and practices that promote student participation at school. A practical outcome of the study will be a reliable and valid survey tool that schools can use to monitor their performance in relation to student participation.

The research is being led by the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University. See <http://ccyp.scu.edu.au/index.php/2> for other partners involved.

What will your participation in the study involve?

We are inviting you to take part in an interview, which will take approximately 30-40 minutes. The interview seeks your views about student participation at school, including students 'having a say' about issues that matter to them.

Involvement in the research is voluntary and you can withdraw from the project at any time without consequences. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. However, all data will be confidential. We will not use any information that could identify you or your school. All data will be stored securely at the University.

The findings from the interviews will inform the development of an online survey to be conducted in 2016. Findings will also be summarised in reports (available to your school), a website of resources, journal articles and conference presentations.

Does this research have ethics approval?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (ECN-15-017) as well as by [SERAP 2015147 or relevant CEO, letter attached]. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research or the researchers, please write to: Ethics Complaints Officer, Southern Cross University, PO Box 157, Lismore NSW 2480. All information is confidential and will be handled as soon as possible.

What should you do now?

If you agree to participate in the interview **please fill out and sign the consent form and return it to your Principal.**

If you have any further questions about this invitation please feel free to contact me. My details are below. Otherwise you can email Project Officer at: email address

Thank you for your interest and support.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Anne Graham
Director, Centre for Children & Young People
School of Education, Southern Cross University
Tel: 02 6620 3613
Email: anne.graham@scu.edu.au

Principal/Teacher Consent Form

I have read and understood the attached information and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that the aim of the research is to explore whether and how schools support student participation, and how this can improve student wellbeing. The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Southern Cross University.

I agree to be interviewed by a researcher for approximately 30-40 minutes. I approve this interview to be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time.

I understand that any information that may identify me will not be used and that my privacy and confidentiality are ensured in all written work associated with this research. I am aware that I can contact the researchers at any time with any queries and that their contact details are provided to me.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please tick the appropriate box(es) and provide your contact details if you would like to receive the following:

- A summary of the results
- Your individual interview transcript

APPENDIX C: POLICY STAKEHOLDER INFORMATION LETTER AND CONSENT FORM

Research project: Improving wellbeing through student participation at school

We are writing to invite you and your school to participate in an exciting research project funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Grant. A key aim of the research is to improve knowledge about whether and how schools actively support student participation, including in decisions about their learning, and how this can improve student wellbeing. The research will provide schools and school systems with frameworks, models and practices that promote student participation at school. A practical outcome of the study will be a reliable and valid survey tool that schools can use to measure and monitor their ongoing performance in relation to student participation.

Who is conducting the research?

The research is being led by the Centre for Children & Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University in partnership with the Catholic Schools Office Lismore, the NSW Department of Education and Communities, the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (formerly NSW Commission for Children and Young People), the Australian National University, the University of Sydney and the University of Central Lancashire.

What will your participation in the study involve?

We would very much appreciate your participation in an interview for the study. The interview will take approximately 30-40 minutes. The interview seeks your views on whether and how current policy emphasises student-centred practice and promotes student participation.

Involvement in the research is entirely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from part, or all, of the project at any time without any consequences. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. However, all information shared by participants will be private and confidential and we will not identify participants. All data will be stored securely at the University for 7 years - in password-protected computer files.

How will the information from the interview be used?

The information from the interviews will inform the development of interview and focus group questions conducted in 2015 at 12 schools. Findings will also be included in a report (which will be made available to all participants), university reports, academic journal articles and conference presentations. If you would like to receive a summary of findings from the interviews via email and/or review your transcription please leave your contact details on the consent form for the researchers.

Does this research have ethics approval?

The ethical aspects and evaluation of this study have been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (ECN-15-017) as well as by [SERAP 2015147 or relevant CEO, letter attached]. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research or the researchers, you should write to the following:

Ethics Complaints Officer
Southern Cross University
PO Box 157, Lismore NSW 2480.

All information is confidential and will be handled as soon as possible.

What should you do now?

If you agree to participate in the study, we would be grateful if you could **complete the attached consent form and send it to us via return email**. A researcher from our Centre will be in contact with you in the near future to arrange a day and time to conduct the interview.

I am very happy to answer any further questions you may have regarding the research. My contact details are below. Alternatively, you may contact Project Officer at: email address

Thank you for your interest and support.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Anne Graham
Director, Centre for Children & Young People
School of Education, Southern Cross University
Tel: 02 6620 3613 Email: anne.graham@scu.edu.au

Policy Stakeholder Consent Form

I have read and understood the attached information and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that the aim of the research is to explore whether and how schools support student participation, and how this can improve student wellbeing. The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Southern Cross University.

I agree to be interviewed by a researcher for approximately 30-40 minutes. I approve this interview to be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time.

I understand that any information that may identify me will not be used and that my privacy and confidentiality are ensured in all written work associated with this research.

I am aware that I can contact the researchers at any time with any queries and that their contact details are provided to me.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please provide your contact details if you would like to receive a summary of the results:

Email address: _____

APPENDIX D: PARENT INFORMATION LETTER AND CONSENT FORM

Research project: Improving wellbeing through student participation at school

Your child has been invited to participate in an exciting research project that will identify whether and how student participation in decision making at school helps their wellbeing.

Who is conducting the research?

The project is being led by the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University (Lismore campus). Please see <http://ccyp.scu.edu.au/index.php/2> for other partners involved.

What will involvement in the study mean for your child?

If you provide permission, your child will be invited to participate in a focus group discussion during class time with 9 other students. The group will be facilitated by one of the researchers from the CCYP and explore students' understanding and experiences of participating at school. With consent of the students, focus group discussions will be audio recorded.

How will the information be used by the researchers?

Involvement in the research is voluntary and you and your child can withdraw at any time without any consequences. All information will be confidential and no child or their school will be identified. All data will be stored securely at the university. The findings will be summarised into a report (which will be made available to all participants), academic journal articles and conference presentations. Your child's school will be provided with a summary of what we learned from the research in late 2015.

Does this research have ethics approval?

The ethical aspects and evaluation of this study have been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (ECN-15-017) as well as by [SERAP 2015147 or relevant CSO, letter attached]. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research or the researchers, you should write to: Ethics Complaints Officer, Southern Cross University, PO Box 157, Lismore, NSW, 2480. All information is confidential and will be handled as soon as possible.

If you agree for your child to participate in the focus group discussion, we would be grateful if you could complete the attached consent form and return it to your child's school.

If you have any further questions about this invitation please feel free to contact me. My details are below. Alternatively, you can email the Project Officer at email:



Professor Anne Graham
Director, Centre for Children & Young People
Tel: 02 6620 3613
Email: anne.graham@scu.edu

Parental Consent Form

I, _____ have read and understood the attached information.

I agree for my child, _____ to participate in this research which I understand involves a focus group discussion that will last for approximately 80 minutes in class time, and will be audio recorded and transcribed. I am also aware my child can withdraw from the study at any time.

I know that the aim of the research is to learn more about student participation at school and how this can improve student wellbeing.

I understand that my child's name or the school name will not be identified in any outputs produced from this research project.

I know that I can contact Anne Graham email: anne.graham@scu.edu or Project Officer at email: email address with any questions that I have about the research.

Your signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E: STUDENT INFORMATION LETTER AND CONSENT FORM

Invitation to be part of a research project called: 'Improving wellbeing through student participation at school'

You are invited to participate in an exciting research project that will help us learn about your experiences of 'having a say' about things that interest or concern you at school and whether this helps your wellbeing.

Why is the study important?

We would like you to be involved because you are experts about your school experiences. What you tell us may help improve school life.

How will I be involved?

Researchers from Southern Cross University will visit your school and talk to you in a small group called a 'focus group'. The focus group will bring together you and about 9 other students to discuss and explore your experiences of 'having a say' at school. The focus group discussion will run for 80 minutes and with your permission will be audio-recorded. If you decide you do not like taking part in the focus group you can stop and leave whenever you want. Also, if you usually have someone helping you with your school work, such as a teacher's aide, carer, or translator, you can bring these people to the focus group to assist you.

How will the information from the focus group be used?

Everything you say in the focus group will be private and confidential, that is, your name or school will NOT be used in any documents. All information from the study will be stored safely at the university, which only researchers working on the project will be able to access. After we have talked to students across different schools we will send your school a summary so you can see what you and others had to say.

What else do you need to know?

The ethical aspects and evaluation of this study have been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (ECN-15-017) as well as by [SERAP 2014147 or relevant CEO, letter attached]. If you have a complaint about the research, and/or the researchers, you can tell someone. Then contact: Ethics Complaints Officer, Southern Cross University, PO Box 157, Lismore, NSW, 2480. All information is confidential and will be handled as soon as possible.

If you agree to be part of the focus group please fill out and sign the attached form and return it to your teacher. We will be visiting your school soon!

If you have any further questions about this invitation please feel free to contact me. My details are below. Otherwise you can email Project Officer at: email address

Yours sincerely,



Professor Anne Graham
Director, Centre for Children & Young People
School of Education, Southern Cross University
Tel: 02 6620 3613
Email: anne.graham@scu.edu.au

Student Consent Form

I, _____ have read and understood the attached information.

I agree to participate in this focus group which will last for approximately 80 minutes and be recorded.

I am also aware that I don't have to participate if I don't want to and can leave the focus group at any time.

I understand the researchers will not tell others what I have said and that they won't use my name or the name of my school in any written work.

I know that I can contact Anne Graham anne.graham@scu.edu or Project Officer at email: with any questions that I have about the research.

Your signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR PRINCIPALS

Introduction

- Overview of the project
- Re-confirm consent to record interview and clarify that no school or individual will be identified.

Turn recorder on...

Icebreaker: review demographics - can you tell me a little about yourself? Number of years teaching and as a Principal, number of schools, etc.

Why participation?

1. What do you see as the big issues students have to navigate at school?
2. In general, is it important for students to be consulted about such issues? Why/why not?
3. What are some of the reasons why you think we sometimes don't give students a say in matters that are important to them?

How do we do participation?

SCRIPT: What you have been saying about student participation is really interesting. We would like to turn now to the kind of participation that has been happening at your school?

4. If I were a student at this school, what opportunities would I have to actively participate? In the classroom? Elsewhere in the school? More broadly in the community?
5. Do all students have an opportunity to actively participate at school? If no, why not?
6. Have you come across any initiatives in schools or classrooms elsewhere that you think work particularly well? Why do you think these worked so well? If none: why do you think that is the case?
7. In your role as Principal what do you do to promote student participation and facilitate opportunities for them to express their views?
8. What are the main challenges you find in doing this?
9. What kind of a mindset do you think is required by teachers to consult more closely with students about their learning and/or other aspects of their experience at school? How is this mindset best encouraged /fostered?

Policies that support participation

10. Do any policies require you to consult with students or actively promote their participation? If so, which ones?
11. Can you tell me about any policies at your school that have had the direct involvement of students in developing these? [If they can] Which students were involved? How did you invite/select them? How did you go about developing these? What were the challenges in doing this? What were the benefits? Did you provide feedback to the students about their input?

Benefits of participation

SCRIPT: One of the aims of this research is whether and how participation benefits students and I'd like to take a few minutes to explore this...

12. What do you think are the benefits for schools in consulting with students and supporting their active participation at school?
13. What are the benefits for students?
14. In what ways, if any, does actively participating at school benefit students' wellbeing?

What is participation?

SCRIPT: One of the biggest challenges we face in progressing student participation is confusion over what we actually mean by the term participation. Just reflecting again now on our discussion...

15. How would you define student participation?
What change is needed?

Closing

16. In thinking about what we've discussed today, what is the biggest change that would need to happen for student participation to be a more routine part of the culture and practice of your school?

[Script here explaining that interview responses from teachers/principals/students will be analysed schools will be given a 'snapshot' of the key findings. Also explain the next stage of the research (development of on-line survey)].

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR HEAD TEACHERS AND TEACHERS

Introduction

Overview of the project

Re-confirm consent to record interview and clarify that no school or individual will be identified.

Turn recorder on...

Icebreaker: review demographics - can you tell me a little about yourself? Number of years teaching, number of schools, grade/stage you currently teach, what subjects do you teach, major teaching interests etc.

Why participation?

1. What do you see as the big issues students have to navigate at school?
2. In general, is it important for students to be more consulted about such issues? Why/why not?
3. What are some of the reasons why you think we don't give students a say?

How do we do participation?

SCRIPT: *What you have been saying about participation is really interesting. We would like to turn now to the kind of participation that has been happening at your school?*

4. If I were a student at this school, what opportunities would I have to actively participate? In the classroom? Elsewhere in the school? More broadly in the community?
5. Do all students have an opportunity to actively participate at school? If no, why not?
6. How do you support student participation through your role or in your classroom?
7. Is there anything that you feel, your schools needs to improve to support students having a say in matters that concern them? (i.e. resources/ skills)
8. Have you come across any initiatives in school or classrooms elsewhere that you think work particularly well? Why do you think these worked so well? If none: why do you think that's the case?
9. Do any policies require you to consult with students or actively promote their participation? If so, which ones?

FOR HEAD TEACHERS ONLY:

In your role as a head teacher/coordinator...

10. What do you do to promote student participation and facilitate opportunities for them to express their views?
11. What kind of a mindset do you think is required by teachers to consult more closely with students about their learning and/or other aspects of their experience at school? How is this mindset best encouraged/fostered in schools?

Benefits of participation?

SCRIPT: *One of the aims of this research is whether and how participation benefits students and I'd like to take a few minutes to explore this...*

12. What do you think are the benefits for schools in consulting with students and supporting their active participation at school?
13. What are the benefits for students?
14. In what ways, if any, does actively participating at school benefit students' wellbeing?

What is participation?

SCRIPT: *One of the biggest challenges we face in progressing student participation is confusion over what we actually mean by the term participation. Just reflecting again now on our discussion...*

15. How would you define student participation?

What change is needed? Closing

16. In thinking about what we've discussed today, what is the biggest change that would need to happen for student participation to be a more routine part of the culture and practice of your school?

[Explain that interview responses from teachers/principals/students will be analysed schools will be given a 'snapshot' of the key findings. Also explain the next stage of the research (development of on-line survey)].

APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR POLICY STAFF

Introduction

Overview of the project

Re-confirm consent to record interview and clarify that no school or individual will be identified.

Turn recorder on...

Icebreaker: Can you tell me a little about yourself and the particular policy area/portfolio you are engaged with?

Questions

1. What are the main challenges, changes or improvements your policy area intends for students?
2. Which of the policies in your area do you think help improve students' meaningful participation at school? How?
3. In general, is it important for students to be consulted about such policy issues? Why/why not?
4. What are some of the reasons we don't consult with students in key policy related matters?
5. Does your Policy Area/Directorate see a role for students in helping develop policies aimed at improving outcomes for students? - Either at a school level or higher within the system
 - a. Is this likely to happen more in the future? What makes you think that?
 - b. If yes, what do you consider the priority areas students' might be able to make a contribution to?
6. What difference do you think this might make to schools? To students?
7. What would need to change within the education system or in particular schools in order to have a greater emphasis on student participation/voice in policy or policy development?

Probe depending on answer to 7:

8. Can policy change the mindset and practice of teachers and principals? What approach works best to do this?

Closing

SCRIPT: *We've covered a lot of territory and you've provided some very rich insights – thank you!*

9. At a system level, if you really wanted to affect change in the way schools consult with students, what kind of policy response might be helpful in achieving this?

Conclude by explaining we will be analysing the data from the interviews. Explain the next stage of the research (interviews/ focus groups and the development of on-line survey).

APPENDIX I: FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE FOR STUDENTS

Introduction

Overview of project, research topic

Ethical obligations

Icebreaker:

Ask students to introduce themselves, write a name tag and share...

Could you please introduce yourself and tell us what band or style of music you like and why?

START RECORDING

What is participation? Quick activity: 5 mins

SCRIPT: *Just quickly, could you all please write down on the piece of paper in front of you – what your understandings are of student participation (student participation means being consulted, have having a say in things that matter to you) at school?*

1. I think student participation means...

Once you have finished put a line underneath your answer then leave this to the side because we will return to this later on.

Experiencing participation

Activity: 10mins

Scenarios

- *Introduce the problem to students*
- *Run through the different 'solutions' one at a time with the related prompt*

SCRIPT

Now let's look at a scenario about having a say at school...

Activity: Explaining different levels of participation

Vignettes

Problem: There is a lot of bullying happening at your school during recess and lunch time.

To solve this problem, the Principal does the following:

Solution A: The Principal creates a new rule that 'students are not allowed to speak or play at recess and lunch time.' (Students not being consulted/having a say)

Solution B: The Principal asks the students for suggestions about how the bullying problem could be fixed, but doesn't seem to take notice of their advice and creates a new rule that 'students are not allowed to speak or play at recess and lunch time.' (Students being consulted, but not listened to)

Solution C: The Principal asks the students for suggestions about how the bullying problem could be fixed and trials a new approach based on students' advice. (Students being consulted/having a say and listened to)

Prompt question for each scenario:

2. How would this decision make you feel?

Explanation of activity:

Explain to the group why we asked everyone to do this activity by discussing what is happening in each scenario and how it shows different levels of being consulted or having a say in matters that affect them at school.

Why participation?

10mins

Discussion:

3. Do you think it is important for students to have a say/be consulted about things that matter to them at school? Why?
4. What things do you get to 'have a say' about at this school?

SCRIPT: *Let's pretend you can have a say in any matter that is important to you...*

5. What things at school would you like to contribute to or have a say about? Prompts – uniform? Rules? Anything else?

How do we do participation?

Group discussion and activity:

10mins

Range of participation – tokenistic to meaningful

10mins

6. What activities are happening at your school that provide opportunities for you to be consulted in things that matter to you? How often do you do this?

SCRIPT - *Researcher explains that they will write these activities down on star-shaped post-it notes*

Activity: Ranking participation

SCRIPT – *Researcher explains Hart's ladder (ladder is in 3 x A3 size rungs with Velcro to sections) by chunking into 'non-participation', 'teacher/adult initiated' and 'student initiated' - Researcher places the rungs on the ladder, briefly explaining each rung. Researcher then reads out each activity on the star post it note and asks students to place where it is positioned on the ladder. The researcher asks the following three questions:*

7. Why did you think to position this activity here?
8. Do you think it makes a difference for students to have this activity in your school? If yes, in what ways?
9. Do all students get to have a say with this activity? Or is it just some?

Discussion:

SCRIPT - *Thinking about your teachers/adults in the school who 'get' the importance of this kind of participation...*

10. In what ways do they support you to have a say?
11. When and how do they do this?
12. Do you think teachers, principals and other school staff have any concerns about students having a say at school? If yes, what do you think these concerns are?

Prompts:

Prompt after each response –

- In class (e.g. democratic classroom structures, teacher assessment/feedback, self-directed projects/topics)
- In school (e.g. student surveys, SRC)
- In the community (e.g. Lions/Rotary club, charities, consultations with children & young people)

Benefits of participation school?

Activity:

15mins

SCRIPT: *Ask students to brainstorm benefits individually on post-it notes*

SCRIPT - *In this activity we would like you to take 30 seconds to individually respond to the question on the yellow post-it note and then share with the group*

13. How could/does the experience of having your voices heard at school benefit ...
...You?

Each student shares what they have written and places it in middle of table

SCRIPT - Repeat activity – now please write a word or two on the green post-it note and then share with the group
How could the experience of participating or having your voices heard at school benefit ...
...The school?

Each student shares what they have written and places it in middle of table

Discussion:

SCRIPT - Now looking at these benefits you've come up with... and thinking back to previous activities (the scenario) and the different opportunities we've discussed for students to be consulted and to have their voices heard...

14. Do any of these things you have listed help your wellbeing? If yes... which ones and how?

SCRIPT– Researcher tells the group that they will collect the things (written on post-it notes) they identify as helping their wellbeing in this 'hat'. Suggests to the group that they may think that all of these things they have listed could help wellbeing...

What is it?

How do you define participation

SCRIPT - Working individually now, I'd like you to return to your definition of participation that you wrote at the beginning and if you could please write down again your definition of student participation. Make sure you've put a line to separate your answer from the beginning.

15. I think student participation means....

Share:

Participants come back together and share ONE idea they wrote down

Prompt: You don't need to write a sentence, it can be dot points of ideas

What change is needed?

Activity: 5mins

- Students brainstorm individually on a piece of paper

Come back together as a group and share 10mins

Being the Principal

SCRIPT - Working individually now, I'd like you to turn over your sheet to the activity on the back. I would like you to think about your understandings of participation for the following activity (read question). Then we'll come back together and you can share one of your ideas with the group...

Following question on sheet of paper in front of students:

16. If you were the school principal, HOW would you help make sure students are able to participate at school?

Instruction to researcher - whilst students are doing this activity, researcher prepares the next mapping activity/discussion for students:

On portable white board (landscape) or butchers paper researcher writes the following (headings are prepared earlier):

- Heading: 'Mapping a participatory school'
- Far right: Researcher writes heading 'potential wellbeing outcomes' and sub heading 'for students' and lists the yellow post-it notes collected in the 'hat' and the second sub-heading 'for school' and lists the green post-it notes collected (as many as possible). If running out of time to write out post-it notes the notes could be stuck to board instead.
- Far left: Researcher writes the heading 'Principal's strategies'
- Centre: Researcher writes the two headings 'barriers' and 'actions'

SCRIPT - *Please share one of your ideas*

Instruction - Researcher writes down students' ideas as they read these out under 'Principal's strategies' heading.

17. What barriers might you face in doing these activities at your school?

Script: Researcher lists the barriers students identify under 'barriers' heading.

18. How do you think the principal or the school could overcome these barriers?

Instruction - Researcher lists students' ideas under 'actions' – make links to Principal strategies above (as actions discussed could be similar). Stepping back and looking at your participatory school – and the potential wellbeing outcomes you have identified when you have more of a say, (explains poster map):

19. Do you have any final reflections and/or ideas about this activity/the 'participatory' school and related benefits, actions and challenges that you have created?

Prompt: *We are not wanting specific things you would change about your school but activities or opportunities that can be put in place to allow students to have a say.*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Several resources have been developed from his research to provide guidance on introducing, strengthening and monitoring student participation at school. These include:

- A *Good Practice Guide* for supporting student participation at school
- The Student Participation Survey (and accompanying information pack) which is a validated survey tool to measure and monitor student participation and wellbeing at school
- Video vignettes on participation at school
- Professional learning resources for school staff

Other research outputs include:

- Full reports for the other phases of the study
- Short summaries of the findings from each phase

The above resources and documents will be available at:
bit.ly/ParticipationStudy

For further information about this project please contact Professor Anne Graham
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