This article discusses the nature of partnership in the formulation of national curriculum policy. The question of student voice shows the limitations of a purely representative interpretation of democracy. Curriculum policy formulation should strive for participatory democracy to allow the authentic voice of students to be heard in every classroom. The recent experience of the NCCA Development Group for Leaving Certificate Art provides an empirical source of reference for consideration.

Student Voice in Curriculum Policy

Partnership strategies for representation or participation?

The concept of partnership is well established in Irish education, notably in the process of curriculum design. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), for instance, consists of partners as represented by teachers, school management bodies, parents, and specific interest groups ranging from trade union and business groups to Irish-language and other specialist groups. The value and benefits of a partnership approach to education policy and national curriculum design in particular have been discussed and documented, as have its weaknesses and deficits (Granville, 2004; Gleeson, 2010).

The established education partners do not include students, but in recent years the need to include student voice in policymaking has been recognised (Fleming, 2015; DoE, 2021). How best to provide an authentic role for students presents a challenge to current policymaking systems. Two distinct but related issues emerge from consideration of student voice in national policy formation. First is the extent to which the voices of students can be heard in the policymaking discourse and the extent of their influence on the outcomes of that process. Second, perhaps less obviously, is the extent to which emergent national policy provides for student voice in the curriculum as interpreted and enacted at school level.

The identification of student voice as a crucial element in schooling also serves to highlight a prominent but often overlooked feature of schooling: its socialisation function. By framing the process of education within the rules and parameters of the school, which are a microcosm of the rules and parameters of wider society, the experience of education becomes an imposition of values, norms, and culture. It becomes an expression of power, not just in the sense of authority and influence but in the hidden transactions, procedures, customs, and protocols of everyday living.

Gary Granville
Emeritus Professor, School of Education, National College of Art and Design, Dublin

The experience of the NCCA Development Group (DG) for Leaving Certificate Art may serve to illustrate how the concept of student voice currently manifests in curriculum design at national level.[1] The membership of the DG reflected the compositional format of all such groups in the NCCA: teacher unions, subject association, Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate, State Examinations Commission, and, as a senior-cycle development group, representatives from higher education and business interests. There was no student representation as such.

However, fieldwork with current and former school students was carried out to augment the deliberations of the group, involving a series of focus groups in three schools of different types and locations and in three art colleges. The focus groups were carried out by Fred Boss, NCCA education officer for art, under the guidance of Dr Paula Flynn, who advised the NCCA on student voice practices (Flynn, 2017). Condensed recordings of students discussing their experiences and expectations of art in school, and their recommendations and desires for any new programme, were presented and discussed at DG meetings. The students who participated were subsequently re-engaged with, and the outcomes of the process were shared with them.

> **The NCCA has adopted the principles of the Lundy model of student voice as an operational practice.**

The NCCA has adopted the principles of the Lundy model (Lundy, 2007) of student voice as an operational practice. These principles specify four conditions for effective and true engagement of students' voice: *space* in which students can express their views, *voice* for students to express their views, *audience* that listens to those views, and *influence* through identifying the response to those views as manifested in policy and practice.

The procedures of student-voice activity exemplify the distinction between representative and participative democracy. The partnership model of policymaking that is manifest in the NCCA is essentially that of representative democracy. It captures all four components of Bolman and Deal's (2021) model of organisational analysis: the structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames are all accommodated.

The limitations of purely representative democracy are highlighted when the question of student voice is considered. A simple response to the issue would be to allocate a place to a school student or two on every DG in the NCCA committee system: this would ostensibly address the issue of representation, but it would be entirely inappropriate in terms of participation. At the simplest level, it would place the student in an invidious position, being expected to engage in a form of discourse and interaction at which they would have little or no experience, let alone confidence and ease.

More significantly, it would presuppose that the form and content of such discourse are the only valid mode of engagement with the topic. The community of practice established through the NCCA committee system has its own unconscious self-protection and replication process, which severely reduces the possibility of radical change or thinking outside the box. Not only would allocating a seat at the table to a student or two be unfair on the students and inadequate to represent the diversity of student

voices, it would also co-opt the students into a system, process, and culture that may be oppressive and inappropriate.

The place of student voice in the formulation of curriculum policy might therefore be best expressed in two forms. First would be an authentic attempt to ascertain some of the wide range of (frequently contradictory) views that students have on every aspect of their curriculum experience. The student voice input to the Leaving Cert Art DG in this respect was helpful and constructive, providing coherent, considered, and diverse views. It was not comprehensive or representative, nor did it purport to be. Second, and most importantly, the curriculum design that emerges from the work of such DGs should be consciously shaped to allow students' diverse views and inputs to be manifested where they can really count – at the level of the school and the classroom.

The culture of teaching and learning in Art has of course always been different from that of most other school subjects. The nature of the subject requires a response from each student in all activities, and a great deal of autonomous decision-making by the teacher. But the current policy environment of education – and indeed of wider public policy – puts repeated emphasis on developing such creative and critical capacities.

> **The first pillar of the Creative Ireland programme is concentrated on creative work with young people in schools and in the wider community.**

For instance, the first pillar of the Creative Ireland programme, a cross-government initiative designed to promote creative engagement across all sections of the population, is concentrated on creative work with young people in schools and in the wider community. Similarly, the Department of Education recognises that education is about more than academic performance: it is also about 'students' personal development, self-actualisation, civic mindedness, wellbeing and capacity for self-expression' (DoE, 2021, p. 18). In curriculum policy, fostering student wellbeing has a prominence and priority that has never been so visible before.

In this policy context, the importance of student voice becomes even more apparent. Two cautionary notes should be sounded, however. First, we need to avoid too narrow or literal an interpretation of 'voice'. An interpretation that expects student voice to be expressed only in formal, verbal form, and in the cultural mode expected in a formal meeting with agendas, minutes, and all the rest, is inappropriate: such a model can be no more than an oppressive form of ventriloquism. Young people, from early childhood onwards, can express their feelings and thoughts in a variety of ways (Hill, 2021, p. 61). Teachers engage with their voice by attending to them, being present for them, and responding in the moment to their thoughts as expressed through various forms and media.

Second, it is important not to engage in a quasi-democratic process with a veneer of participation rather than true engagement. Curriculum specifications should provide for organic and differentiated views to be heard at local level, by always ensuring that teachers and students have enough time and space to explore and follow aspects of their subject that are not centrally specified. The old Irish custom of the farmer leaving one corner of the field wild and untilled (*cúinne an ghiorria*, the hare's corner),

to allow organic and unplanned natural processes to take place, can serve as a good model of curriculum development that allows the student voice to be heard and acknowledged in a participative practice.

REFERENCES

Bolman, L.G. and Deal, T.E. (2021) *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, 7th ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Department of Education (DoE) (2021) Statement of Strategy 2021–2023. Dublin: DoE.

Fleming, D. (2015) 'Student voice: An emerging discourse in Irish education policy', *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 8(2), 223–242.

Flynn, P. (2017) The Learner Voice Research Study Research Report. Dublin: NCCA.

Gleeson, J. (2010) *Curriculum in Context: Partnership, Power and Praxis in Ireland*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

Granville, G. (2004) 'Politics and partnership in curriculum planning in Ireland'. In: C. Sugrue (ed.) *Curriculum and Ideology: Irish Experiences, International Perspectives*, pp. 67–100. Dublin: Liffey Press.

Hill, L. (2021) 'Proposing an ethico-aesthetic paradigm for Irish early childhood art education research'. Unpublished PhD thesis, NCAD, Dublin.

Lundy, L. (2007) 'Voice is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942.

ENDNOTES

1. The NCCA Development Group for Leaving Certificate Art was established in 2017 and had nine full meetings and a number of subgroup meetings over 18 months. The author was independent chair of the group. Its recommendations were accepted by the NCCA and the Minister for Education and became live from September 2021.

⁂

> " The old Irish custom of the farmer leaving one corner of the field wild and untilled to allow organic and unplanned natural processes to take place, can serve as a good model of curriculum development that allows the student voice to be heard and acknowledged in a participative practice."

Gary Granville