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The effect of student voice on the perception of student agency

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ABSTRACT

Student voice and agency are important topics in education, but related initiatives remain under-investigated. This study investigates the link between student voice and perception of student agency through the introduction of a student-led committee using a longitudinal mixed-method approach in an independent secondary school in Scotland. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted for the students' ($n = 95$) responses showing an increase in mean effect ($p = 0.025$) of the introduction of the committee on student perception of student consultation and decision making in the school. Committee members reported a reduction in their sense of agency ($n = 5, p = 0.045$). Qualitative data is presented to support the discussion of results which suggest student-led committees affect the perception of student agency and wider school ethos is important.

1. Introduction

This work seeks a link between student voice and the perception of student agency. Voice and influence over strategic matters allow students to feel more included in their educational setting (Biddle, 2018). Through this agency and inclusivity, a more socially just environment can be developed (Cook-Sather, 2020). This study, in a single Scottish Independent Secondary School, looked at the effect of introducing a student chaired committee. Surveys were used to measure perceptions as they changed after the instigation of the committee. This measurement is intended to give an understanding of students' reflections on their own perceptions of their voice in light of the creation of a committee specifically intended to give the students a place to find their voice. The research is intended to inform schools in how they intend to create student bodies which will have some control over decision making, an important aspect of the current dialogue in Scottish education (Education Scotland, 2018) but also pertains to the wider audience. The alignment of student and staff perceptions which has a wider bearing on how schools should regard their own policies and understanding of their populations is also indicated. The next two sections set out the author's standpoint on agency and student voice as concepts before looking to this research in context.

1.1. Agency

Bandura (2001), states that agency is an embodiment of 'the endowments, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities and distributed structures and functions through which personal influence [is] exercised.' Agency can be relational (Pineda-Báez, Manzuoli, & Sánchez, 2019), and constructed through social interactions (Kumpulainen, Lipponen, Hilppö, & Mikkola, 2014). The capacity to enact agency in a situation can be developed (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017) and is therefore less an attribute and more a reflection of current actions and interactions (Klemencic, 2015).

The core features of personal agency are intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2001). Intentionality represents a commitment to perform an agentic act, and the outcomes are the consequences of these acts, which are subject to forethought – people will anticipate the possible outcomes and aim to act in a way which is favourable to their desired result.

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Self-reflectiveness then comes to the fore, as people will have less incentive to act if they feel that their actions will not lead to their desired outcomes. This type of agency is subject to a wide range of social and structural influences, gathered from the particular situation a person is in.

The meanings people ascribe to situations are dependant on the social practices they take part in (van Huizen, van Oers, & Wubbels, 2005). While this was referring to teachers in training, the idea could be extended to students – the socio-cultural structures both teachers and students find themselves in will have a direct effect on their understanding of situations and therefore their agency (Kumpulainen et al., 2014). Some of the same changes to the structure and culture which are required for student agency are also required for teacher agency, which would be mutually beneficial (Priestley & Minty, 2013).

All sectors of the community should be heard, not just those who are most forthcoming (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). If staff only enter into dialogue with those they can already relate to, it is unlikely that student voice systems will result in significant improvement (Chopra, 2016), and staff must be ready for student voice initiatives (Raymond, 2001). Involving all stakeholders in decisions helps everyone to participate in successful schools (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Day (2011, p. 193) states that successful heads are notable for their sense of agency, linking the concept with leadership. It could be suggested, then, that developing student agency assists in the development of student leadership. Distributing leadership throughout an organisation, including students, provides all stakeholders with collective agency (Harris, 2004). Mitra (2004) suggests that student voice impacts agency by increasing students' ability to articulate what they think, giving them identities as the makers of change and allowing their ideas and feelings of leadership to develop.

Student agency reflects students' contexts through their actions and interactions with their environment (Klemencic, 2015), it is an act in a particular situation where influence is used (Mitra, 2004). Though alternative views describe it as the 'capacity' for acting for one's own good (Podolefsky, Rehn, & Perkins, 2012). In this researcher's opinion, the idea of agency as a temporally shifting mechanism of a person, subject to their situation and complex interactions, more readily captures its essence. In other words, the 'capacity' idea of agency is dependant on these factors, though while the situation is important, it is clear that the capacity to enact agency in a situation can be developed (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017). This work seeks to place students in a position of responsibility in order to look at its effect on agency, but the discussion looks at whether wider changes are required to lead to increased agency.

1.2. Student voice

Mitra (2004) suggests that student voice impacts agency by increasing students' ability to articulate what they think and allows their ideas of leadership to develop. It leads to greater learning and a greater role in society, and, it could be argued, research does not adequately account for the importance of possibilities afforded by student leadership and engagement (Damiani, 2016). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that each child has a right to involvement in decisions about their learning (The United Nations, 1989). As an extension of this, student voice, which can be regarded as an overarching term describing the myriad methods through which student opinion is heard (Mitra, 2004), could be used to ensure effective, impactful methods of student involvement. It is important to measure and evaluate the impact of student voice initiatives (Pearce & Wood, 2016).

Policies are not always clear in their intentions for student voice initiatives. For example, in Scotland the HMIe (2007) suggested that young people must be involved in decisions relating to the improvement of schools, but there was little research base for the claim, and little information about how to achieve it. In the current Scottish Policy context, 'How Good Is Our School?' 4th Edition features only one specific mention of 'learner voice' as a 'significant feature of highly effective practice' (HMIe, 2015, p. 68). There are multiple references throughout the policy document to involvement in decision making, but the document falls short of indicating what would be constituted as a successful implementation of student consultation. Some have suggested that the improvement and 'performativity' agenda leave schools in a predicament when it is difficult to prove a direct relationship between improving student voice and achieving set targets (Fielding, 2007; MacBeath, Myers, & Demetriou, 2001).

Chua (2009) describes the issues of educational design being conscious of performativity above all else, reforms tend to focus on the easily measurable outcomes of changes. This is an issue when dealing with student voice, as it may have indirect, rather than clearly measurable, influences on school performance. Alexander (2014) suggests that one of the main priorities for lasting reform in the primary sector should be ensuring that children have a voice in education reform – and that we must be wary of being tokenistic in our approach. Developing a system which works must recognise the importance of teacher involvement – since often the consequences will be at least as significant for them (Chopra, 2016).

There is a risk in the strategy presented here that student voice becomes 'something a small number of other students, often not like them, do with a small number of teachers' (Fielding, 2001a). Those readily equipped to speak are more likely to be heard, and their views may not echo those of others with equal right to a voice but disinclined to use it. All members of the school community must be able to take on this sense of agency for successful sharing and improvement (Swaffield & Macbeath, 2009), but we must ensure 'students must participate because they want to' (Raymond, 2001).

The student perspective can also be important in decoding the language used by students correctly – sometimes researchers misunderstand what is meant by students, and students as researchers can reduce this effect (Chopra, 2016; Raymond, 2001). Fielding (2001) captured this well by stating 'students see different issues and see issues differently.' This succinct statement has profound implications both for how and what we should capture through student voice work. It is not enough simply to collect data on student voice, it is equally important to discern the meaning of the work and the teacher voice must not be lost (Fielding, 2001a). Instead, both must be seen as mutually beneficial and important, and they must be 'active partners' in the initiative. Even when students see the same issues as important, their concerns and opinions in relation to these topics may come from an entirely different perspective (Fielding, 2004). Ensuring that staff who are active in student voice projects are open to their colleagues is important in order to allow

initiatives to grow. This research was conducted over a short period, and one discussion point is whether this needs a longer time to develop.

The Environment and Sustainability Committee (ESC) was set up whilst taking note of the views of Bergmark and Konstenius (2009). The themes which could be explored through this committee, such as global citizenship are central to the current Scottish curriculum (MacKenzie, Enslin, & Hedge, 2016). Students were invited to set the agenda for the committee from the start, and the goals set were their own. This, it was hoped, would help to increase the committee members' motivation. One of the effects this study seeks to investigate is students' perception of agency – since discursive activities such as committees should allow students to exercise it (Matthews & Singh, 2015). Previous research has laid out how agency and student voice are connected through including students in genuine collaboration between staff and students (Cook-Sather, 2020). However, as Hall (2016) noted, student voice does not necessarily lead to agency, which highlights the need for practitioners to listen meaningfully to what the voice is saying.

1.3 Context

In part, the aim of developing student voice is to strengthen students' commitment and attitude to learning (Fielding, 2007) so effective implementation of student voice initiatives is an aid to the development of students' sense of agency. Chopra (2016) highlighted that students spoke of a 'ripple effect' whereby it was not only members of the student voice initiative which felt the progress made by the initiative. This is one of the effects investigated through the questionnaires – whether the creation of a specifically student led committee affects only those in it, or the wider school.

Through the environment and sustainability committee the school sought to consult students on issues as students see them. The situation where a small set of restricted matters akin to the environmental equivalent of 'lunch breaks, discos and school trips' (Fielding, 2001a) was hoped to be avoided and instead the aim was to focus on matters within the remit which were central to learning, teaching and improvement in the school. This, however, assumed that these are subjects that students wanted to tackle – and more importantly, felt that they were subjects which they had agency over. Fielding (2001a) addresses this concern by indicating that when students are helped to use the language and dialogue required, they often demonstrate a capability to articulate themselves on important matters.

2. Method

2.1. Research questions

This research intends to identify a link, if present, between a student's perception of agency and their understanding of the importance of student voice within their context.

The major question covered in this research is to consider if the creation of student led committees in a school can increase the perception of agency, even if students are not directly involved. Additionally, it has been attempted to look at a small number of students to investigate if student led committees affect perception of committee members' agency in education.

2.2. Methodology

This research is a longitudinal mixed methods project (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007), however the main part of the research, and the analysis, have been conducted in the positivist scheme (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013, p. 7). The majority of the work is on quantitative survey data, however each questionnaire included at least one question which was open to a written answer and has been analysed in a qualitative manner. These long responses are used to inform understanding of the numerical data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Digital questionnaires were used to gather data, with the vast majority of the questions using an 11 point scale for the answer. Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered concurrently in the same survey. Most questions were asked in a pre- and post-change questionnaire. These were made available, with an intervening time-period, with the aim of performing numerical analysis to establish correlation, if not causation. Through using this time lapse method, and measuring the change, rather than the absolute value of opinions it is intended that issues of differing perception of the meaning of values are reduced as the change in answer is likely to be less open to differing perception. This sort of longitudinal design allowed some exertion of control, or at least some understanding of, the variables other than what was specifically being measured, and allowing 'causal inferences to be made' (Bryman, 2012, p. 63). As the research was conducted in a single school it was not possible to use a control group.

2.3. Research setting and sample

The research was conducted in a single Independent Secondary school in Scotland chosen due to the large number of potential respondents, the ease of access for data collection (all students had access to online surveys) and the status of student committees in the school. The students in the school are aged between 11 and 18 (years one to six). During the course of the study a student-led student committee called the Environment and Sustainability Committee (ESC) was established. One staff member (the researcher) acted as a staff representative, but the remainder of the committee, including the co-chairs, were students.

Previous to the establishment of this committee, the school operated a Pupil Council (PC) system where two representatives from six year groups were selected, and the 'head' boy and girl were also in attendance. Additionally, the Head of Senior School and three

academic staff members attended all PC meetings. The meetings were chaired by the Head of Senior School. No other student councils or committees were school wide.

The ESC was self-selecting and created through volunteers from each year group. A call for volunteers to join the committee was put out by the member of staff who subsequently served as the staff member or on the committee. Year five was represented by three students, with the remaining five year groups represented by two students. The final (sixth) year students were chosen to chair the committee. There was one ESC meeting before the first survey, and a further three meetings between surveys. The agenda, and procedure was conducted by the chairs, with guidance from the researcher when requested. The committee was able to communicate with the wider school populous by posting messages to the whole school via the school bulletin which is read to all students daily and available to students and parents through an online portal. The chairs presented at a whole school assembly after the first questionnaire had been completed, so all present students should have been exposed to the committee. Two questionnaires were issued, the first in January, just after the creation of the ESC. The second was issued in early May. The decision was taken to sample the whole school as the sample set, even if all potential respondents completed both forms, would be manageable.

There were three separate groups, each answered two questionnaires in this work.

- 1 All students. The population was approximately 1400. Overall, 395 individual students responded however only 95 students responded to both questionnaires. (18% first year, 24% second year, 16% third year, 18% fourth year, 13% fifth year, and 11% sixth year students.)
- 2 The committee membership (students only), this was a small number of students – the attendance at meetings fluctuated between 10 and 15 members. Five responded to both questionnaires, they also responded to group one questions. (One first year, one third year, one fourth year and two fifth year students).
- 3 Teaching staff. From the population of approximately 150, 58 responded and 18 answered both questionnaires.

The initial group one questionnaire had 14 items, seven Likert scale responses (0–10), one question asking for year group, four questions to understand the awareness of the committee and its aims and one extended response question, this final question had 46 responses. A question asked if the student was a member of the ESC in order to open group two questions. The initial group two questionnaire had five items. Three were Likert scale questions (0–10), two were open ended with five and zero responses respectively. The initial group three questionnaire had nine items. Four Likert scale questions (0–10), three questions to understand the awareness of the committee and its aims and one extended response which received 13 responses.

The final questionnaires for each of the groups were the same but asked students to consider how the introduction of the student voice initiative had affected their perceptions. The group one open ended question had 34 responses. The group two open ended questions received five and one responses to the open-ended questions respectively. The group three final questionnaire included a Likert scale question which had been omitted in the initial questionnaire, nine responses were given to the open-ended question. The questions were asked at the inception of the committee and after approximately five months had passed. It was intended to find out if the students perceived a change in the level of student voice available to them in the school, and if the student and staff perceptions were similar. Due to space restrictions, only selected results are presented in this paper.

2.4. Data analysis

All quantitative data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 24 for Windows (SPSS) (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) (Bryman, 2012, pp. 354–375). Two tailed paired samples t-tests were performed on the data, and the mean and standard deviations for each set of answers were determined. Box-whisker plots were used to check for outliers and t-tests were repeated with and without outliers. No substantive differences were found and so the full data has been included in the t-tests reported. The qualitative data were coded using open coding (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 561). The categories were based on themes such as 'requests for more information on school plans,' 'specific academic suggestions' and 'specific non-academic suggestions' (Bryman, 2012, p. 299).

3. Results

Statistically significant quantitative results are given below which indicate an effect of the specific student voice intervention in this study. Further quantitative data is presented indicating the mean response to a selection of the questions as these indications of perceptions are used to inform the discussion section and indicate perception at a given time rather than a connection to the specific intervention. Quantitative data is briefly described in terms of types of responses and specific responses can be found in the discussion section.

3.1. Quantitative results

Students were asked to indicate the ESC had on their perception of student consultation and participation in the school. There was an increase of 0.726 in mean student response (95% CI [0.094, 1.358]) from an initial ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 2.774$) to a final value ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 2.489$), $t(94) = -2.282$, $p = 0.025$. This is statistically significant, indicating that the ESC increased the perception of student consultation and decision making at the end of the time period, though the mean remains low. Staff only answered this question in the final survey. ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 2.351$ for $N = 18$). This may indicate that, at the time of the second survey, the academic staff felt that the Environment and Sustainability Committee had a greater effect on their perception of student agency than the

students did. Further data would be required to compare the data.

The student committee members were asked how big an effect membership of the committee has/had on their perception of their own independence and decision making with regards to their learning. There was a decrease between surveys of 3.200 (95% CI [-0.108, 6.292]) from an initial mean response ($M = 7.40$, $SD = 0.894$) to mean final response ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 2.387$), $t(4) = -2.874$, $p = 0.045$. The decrease in mean score is statistically significant, however the number of responses is very low and this may affect the validity of conclusions based on the test. The change indicates a decrease in perception as a result of being a member of the Committee.

The remaining results are quantitative results are presented to inform the discussion, as the mean values themselves are of note, however the results of the t-tests showed that the change in mean was not statistically significant. When students were asked how well the school consults and engages them in decision making the mean increased marginally from an initial ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 2.274$) to a final value ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 2.014$). The staff response saw a similar negligible change in mean response from an initial ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 3.036$) to a final value ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.776$). The difference over the time period is shown for completeness, it is interesting to note that the values for student opinion are lower than those of staff opinion.

In a related question, respondents were asked if it is important that students are on committees in the school. The mean response from both students and staff was high through. The student mean response was initially ($M = 8.13$, $SD = 1.823$) and in the second study ($M = 7.79$, $SD = 2.259$). Conversely, the staff response increased from ($M = 7.61$, $SD = 1.914$) initially, to ($M = 8.17$, $SD = 1.581$). Overall, staff and students are quite closely matched in the high importance they placed on student representation on committees, but latterly staff were becoming more convinced of the importance.

Asked how much of an effect student led committees have on students' sense of control over their learning and decisions showed a decreased in mean response for students from an initial ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 2.756$) to a final value ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 2.607$). The two means are very similar, however this was not the case in the staff returns which indicated an increase of 1.111 in mean staff response (95% CI [-0.057, 2.279]) from an initial ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 2.587$) to a final value ($M = 6.22$, $SD = 1.865$). The mean values in both staff and student responses indicated a moderate but importance perception of the impact student led committees on agency.

Students and staff were asked how much the school values student decision making and freedom of choice. Student responses showed a decrease initial ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 2.386$) to a final value ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 2.398$). The larger decrease was seen in staff response from an initial ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 2.169$) to a final value ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.465$). Over this time period students felt consistently that the school valued student agency moderately, while staff started from a higher point, at the end of the research period they were at a similar moderate level to students themselves.

3.2. Qualitative results

In each the surveys, students were asked what the school could do to increase their feeling of independence and control over decision making in order to understand how pupils felt their agency could be improved. In the first questionnaire there were 46 student responses and 34 in the second. Responses were coded as shown in Table 1. Some responses were coded in more than once. This table shows the categories which were found in the data. Of note is that the requests for increased opportunities for and information about committees reduced over the time period. The wish for an improvement in communication, both to students and from students remains high throughout.

The same question was asked of the staff with 13 responses in each survey. The coding categories used in this case have been altered to reflect the range of responses from staff, as shown in Table 2. Communication is also significant in these responses, as is the wish for greater engagement. This is similar to the outcome of the student surveys.

The five student committee respondents all replied to the open-ended question asking what they expected to gain (initial survey) or had gained (final survey) from the ESC. In the first survey, four spoke of a wish to help with environmental concerns, which is to be expected in this particular committee, but one answer additionally looked to the positive impact through influencing and appealing to other students. This particular respondent was disappointed with the progress of the committee in their comment in the final survey. The respondent who did not mention the environment in the first survey stated they were looking for experience, and in the second they indicated that they knew better how to cope in open discussions. An additional open-ended question asking for additional information had one response over the two surveys, and this stated that the student led group "has been more effective at allowing individual members to express their views in a more friendly environment".

Table 1
Coded student responses on how to improve agency.

Category	Number of responses	
	Initial questionnaire	Final questionnaire
Independence/decisions in classrooms/subjects	6	4
Independence/decisions outside the classroom	1	2
Comments with no information	3	5
Request for more student led councils and wider participation	10	5
Request for more information about opportunities/committees	4	3
Request for wide dialogue/consultation and better communication	16	13
A wish for more opportunities to gauge student opinion/suggestions	17	9

Table 2
Coded staff responses on how to improve agency.

Category	Number of responses	
	Initial questionnaire	Final questionnaire
Better communication of student decisions/input	4	6
Improved engagement of students/freedom to be in leadership roles	4	7
Consider school already achieving this well	1	0
Widening student participation	3	4
Listening/Asking specific questions of the student populous to make decisions	6	1

4. Discussion

The research was intended to investigate a potential link between student voice, by creating a directly student led committee, and perception of agency. Agency is a complex idea, but one which is heavily dependant on context and, in line with the research cited above it was intended to investigate the development students' perception of agency over time. In the time between surveys there was a small, but statistically significant, increase in the effect the student led committee had on their perception of student consultation and participation in school. While this is a positive result indicating that the basic idea of involving students in this manner is positive, the actual mean score remained low. This is similarly backed up by students stating they would like more, similar, committees which are student led to be available in the extended response questions. The staff mean score was higher and this indicates a specific issue which is present – the difference between staff and student perception of the situation. It is clear from the qualitative data, too, that students want their voices to be heard. The high number of responses looking for more opportunity to vote or portray their opinions is striking, but the request for improved dialogue, consultation and generally better communication is striking. This tallies with previous work (Raymond, 2001) which indicates that students strongly value the explanation of decisions which are significant to them in their daily lives.

There was a clear and attributable improvement in perception due to the ESC's existence, though it was not enough to show what could be considered a 'positive' perception of agency in this case. It is smaller than may have been expected and could be explained by a feeling that student voice is not valued enough in the school. Comments indicated a wish for more, similar, opportunities with one student stating 'allow us more opportunities as well as the ESC to lead groups'. Staff were only surveyed at the end of the research period for this question where they showed a belief that the ESC had a greater effect than the students' perceptions. Returning to the concept of agency, it could be suggested that students are keen to develop their sense of agency, but it is possible that the situational factors make this challenging. It would be worth delving further into how this perception can be altered, especially where staff do not feel there is an issue to be solved.

Both students and staff were strongly of the opinion that students should be on committees in school (the mean was circa 8 throughout) and from this we can infer that both groups see student voice as important and similar results indicate a general feeling that is important for students to lead committees, mean results stayed at 7.3 for students and 7.6 for staff throughout (full data is not presented in this paper). It must be noted that staff who chose to respond to these surveys may be predisposed to view student voice as important. These results would seem to indicate that it is important, therefore, to increase the number of potential places on committees for students, or find other forums to gather student opinion, and to increase leadership opportunities for these students. This would seem to address three points raised by the students – the wish for wider participation (which is shared by staff), a wish for more student led councils and the more general request for greater consultation. One comment shows this perfectly, 'run more pupil led committees to hear the voices of pupils, especially those who would not normally speak out in a staff run committee.' The majority of student comments indicated a wish to be consulted, involved or at the very least informed about decision making in the school. It is clear that the students wish to take part in the activities of democratisation of areas of the school through what has been described as the inherently political student voice process (Nelson, 2016), however the various data provided means that it is important, as Nelson suggests, to look at how this participation manifests itself, it must be through genuine opportunity for inclusion of a wide range of students.

Staff and student opinion is marginally divided when it comes to considering the quality of consultation and engagement, though mean responses from both January and May are approximately 4.9 for students and slightly higher for staff indicating that both sections feel improvement can be made. The importance here is that the student perception being lower than staff may be part of the issue which resulted in a large number of responses asking for improved consultation and dialogue. Staff were, however, concerned about participation and engagement and were clear that they felt that there should be more opportunity with one concerned that 'only small groups are usually involved.' This is in harmony with the thoughts of students, too, as their extended responses which alluded to the requirement for widening access to committees or a feeling of detachment from the decision-making process. The spectrum, however, is wide – comments range from 'I feel that [the school] listen[s] but do[es] not take [our opinions] on board' to 'I would like more opportunity to speak up... despite not having a place of office bearer or pupil council.' This highlights a major concern of student voice, where the voice is that of a sub-group of students rather than the student body. Swaffield and MacBeath (2009) conveyed this as all members of the community requiring to have this sense of agency. Again, it is worth noting that the while those who responded to the staff survey appear to be generally supportive of the concerns raised by the students who wish to have a greater active voice in the school, the low return rate of staff forms could be indicative of a wider issue, previous research has outlined how the underlying belief of some staff is likely to be that previous norms should continue (Brasof & Spector, 2016).

When asked how much the school values pupil decision making and freedom of choice the student mean response reduced slightly while the staff response indicated a more significant reduction. More importantly, in both cases the respondents felt that the school only moderately valued student agency. Throughout this period the importance of the overall school student committee was discussed in the school and the student body was hopeful of changes to the system, however, no significant change to the system was obvious to the general student populous. On one hand this could be having a positive impact since it was widely known, however, the more likely impact was that the lack of change was seen by students as indicating the perceived lack of importance placed by the school leadership on this aspect of school life. One student statement was felt to be particularly interesting, indicating negative perceptions of peers and staff alike, 'If the school is to maintain a pretence of pupil involvement more explanation is required of why actions were taken. Although I am sure I am in a minority, most probably aren't too fussed.' It has previously been suggested that a whole-school approach is required to student voice (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006), and it could be considered that in this setting the wider approach to student voice which is intended to be adopted will be a positive move.

In order to measure student perception of agency as a result of student led committees, students were asked how much of an effect student led committees have on students' sense of having control of learning and decisions in the school, the student mean response reduced over the research period whereas the staff response increased. This suggests student-led committees are only moderately effective in increasing perception of agency in this group, and the ESC did not make a clear difference over this period. This was somewhat at odds with the qualitative data where multiple students in both surveys suggested that an improvement in independence and decision making could come through an increased number of and wider participation in student led committees with one student asking for the school to 'create more opportunities to make decisions for ourselves'. Similarly, it is possible that ensuring students are aware of the rights and responsibilities by taking part in student led committees there may be more wish to participate, for example, one student stated the school should encourage members of committees to have 'greater responsibility,' ensuring that they talk about topics important to the students themselves. This echoes the work of Rudduck and Flutter (2000) where students often feel that issues discussed are not pertinent enough.

This lack of impact of the work of the ESC is a limitation of this research since, in order to exert a significant change in perception of agency, it is likely that greater committee output would be required. Despite a whole school assembly led by the ESC where the whole student population were present, not all students were aware of the committee or that it was student led. This is an important aspect of what can be learned from the research – the impact of student initiatives must be evident in order for them to have an effect on the opinions and perceptions of students. The conclusion is, if it is taken that agency is positive, student committees should be seen as an important part of school student consultation. It could be suggested that seeing the possibility of a student led committee allows students to see the benefits they could bring, should they be active. The combination of improved student perception of consultation and participation combined with the ESC reduction in perception of independence may indicate that the ESC feel the context in which they are working is not conducive to employing their agency (Klemencic, 2015) and it is important that this agency is developed in order that their voice can genuinely be heard (Mitra, 2004). While methods to do this are beyond the scope of the current work – if we are to situate these students as future global citizens it is a necessary step to take.

A core reason for the choice of subject matter, sustainability, for the student led committee was its growing centrality to the discourse in Scottish education (Christie et al., 2019). This, combined with the hoped-for congruence with student values, was intended to create the conditions for a dynamic committee with major aims. The reality is reflected in the fact that the number of committee members responding to both surveys was small. As a proportion of total possible respondents, it was higher than either of the other categories (staff or students) but meant that more than half of the committee did not respond to both surveys. This means that the reliability of these results is somewhat diminished, but the information remains important.

Students on the committee were asked what effect the ESC had on their perception of their own independence regarding their learning, once again acting as a method to discover the effect of the ESC on perception of agency. The mean response reduced significantly suggesting the committee was caused a decrease in members' perception of agency. This may be attributed to the lack of clear action resulting from the committee's work and therefore students feel the lack of success of this particular committee. Interestingly, the students felt that the reduction in impact on other students' perception of agency was lower. Positively, one respondent did suggest that a 'pupil lead group has been more effective at allowing individual members to express their views in a more friendly environment.' One major flaw in the activity of the committee was the challenged leadership. Due to time constraints, the committee was setup and started without time for training of the chairs. This, in turn, led to difficulties in running meetings and coming to conclusions. Additionally, since the committee was being run in a way which no other committee had been run, students were unfamiliar with the format and may have felt unclear about the scope of what was available to them. Mitra (2018) suggests a hierarchy of student voice moving from listening, through collaboration to student leadership. It is possible that this research tried to push through these stages too quickly, so as to reduce the ability to push against what are called the 'traditional roles' played by students and staff. Should further research be conducted in this setting, it would be essential to provide greater clarity for those taking part in what is possible for them to control. Additionally, it would be essential to conduct some form of leadership training to ensure students understood how to conduct meetings and organise agendas in a way which would allow them to conduct business efficiently.

5. Conclusions and further work

The overall results indicate that students want to be genuinely consulted, where students feel that action is taken and results of consultation are discussed with them. In the final survey, it was clear that many respondents had seen an effect of the ESC, but this effect was diminished by its inactivity. In this particular school setting, the results indicate that the school may not be ready for the type of student voice collaboration, reflecting what Rudduck and Flutter (2000) wrote about creating effective initiatives. The research

bears out the complexities of agency in school settings – the context and environment were stated as important (Klemencic, 2015) and agency must be developed (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017).

This research indicated that student led committees can affect the perception of student agency in education, however this impact was small for the overall student population, and strongly negative for those members of the committee, in the case of this study. The other responses appear to indicate that the feeling of student agency is strongly affected by the wider ethos in the school and that a student committee system would need to form part of a wider shift to have a more measurable effect on perception of student agency. To answer the research questions based on the outcomes presented here, student led committees affect and marginally improve student perception of agency however committee members report that it has a negative effect.

One of the difficulties with research of this type is that the change being made is not made in isolation. The wider context of the school, and the long-term perception of Student Voice in the school appear to have a significant impact on the response. As the researcher present in the committee meetings, it was surprising to see the difficulty that senior students faced in creating an agenda and successfully conducting a meeting of a committee. Given the wider importance of student leadership in education (MacBeath, 2005), it would seem important to remedy this situation.

Students feel that student voice is significant, and they indicate that it has a large effect on their perception of agency. Therefore, if it is assumed that perception of agency is a positive outcome, it can be inferred that we should investigate methods, including student voice, to increase this perception.

A summary could be made by the comment of one student asking staff to ‘actually take our opinions and ideas into account.’ This statement sums up the overarching theme of the results; many students hold opinions on school matters, and they are confident that these opinions are of import. They think that student led committees may give the action which is required but, in order for that to happen, the opinions and ideas must be acted upon and the opportunity to participate and influence decisions must be increased.

5.1. Recommendations

In this school, by developing a meaningful student voice system throughout, students are likely to develop a greater perception of agency. This, however, would require significant investment in student leadership to ensure that those students participating in committees see the outcome of their work. More generally, it is important to listen to students, and student comments suggest they value explanation of significant decisions. The format of any student voice will depend on individual schools, however, evidently the committee format may be conducive to focussed discussion. One model to consider is a major student council with separate committees which report on specific issues. This widens access while maintaining focus and may address some of the students concerns that not every voice is heard. By extending the range, remit and influence of these groups it may be possible to increase buy-in from students and staff alike. It is essential that students feel that their ideas as seriously considered and that the committees are not there to give the idea of agency, without the reality.

5.2. Limitations and further research

This was a single-school study with students aged 11–18. Repetition with different age groups, socio-economic backgrounds and educational systems may yield different results. The response rate as a population of the school was somewhat disappointing, and this was compounded by a high attrition rate between surveys for the students. The response rate was lower than 10% overall for students meaning the results may be skewed towards those students invested in having their voices heard. While the response rate was higher amongst the staff population, attrition resulted in a similar final response rate. Again, it is potentially the case that the data has been skewed towards those with a particular interest in the areas of environmental work, or student voice. Given that this is research intended to research the enactment of student voice, it is significant that the response rate to a student questionnaire is low and this itself may warrant further study especially in light of the response of the ESC members. The results must be considered with knowledge that no control group was in place to compare against. Given the complexities of schools there will be other activities which may have implications on the result. In particular, the Pupil Council may have impacted the opinions of the respondents’ views. The very nature of the school environment is dynamic and the research design did not allow for a control group, and this should be accounted for in future research in the area.

Further research into the connection between student voice and agency could ensue. One criticism of the current study could be that the work was over a relatively short period of time – a longer term would increase the validity and reliability of the results, giving more time for the effect of the ESC to have impact. This would also have allowed for follow up to enable focus groups and interviews to more clearly hear the students’ voices when discussing both agency and student voice within the school setting. Similarly, the scope of similar research could be expanded to a wider range of schools to investigate if the results would be different with a changed demographic, or in a school where a Student Voice system is more deeply engrained. Particularly interesting would be to study a link between agency and attainment due to student voice over a number of years.

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