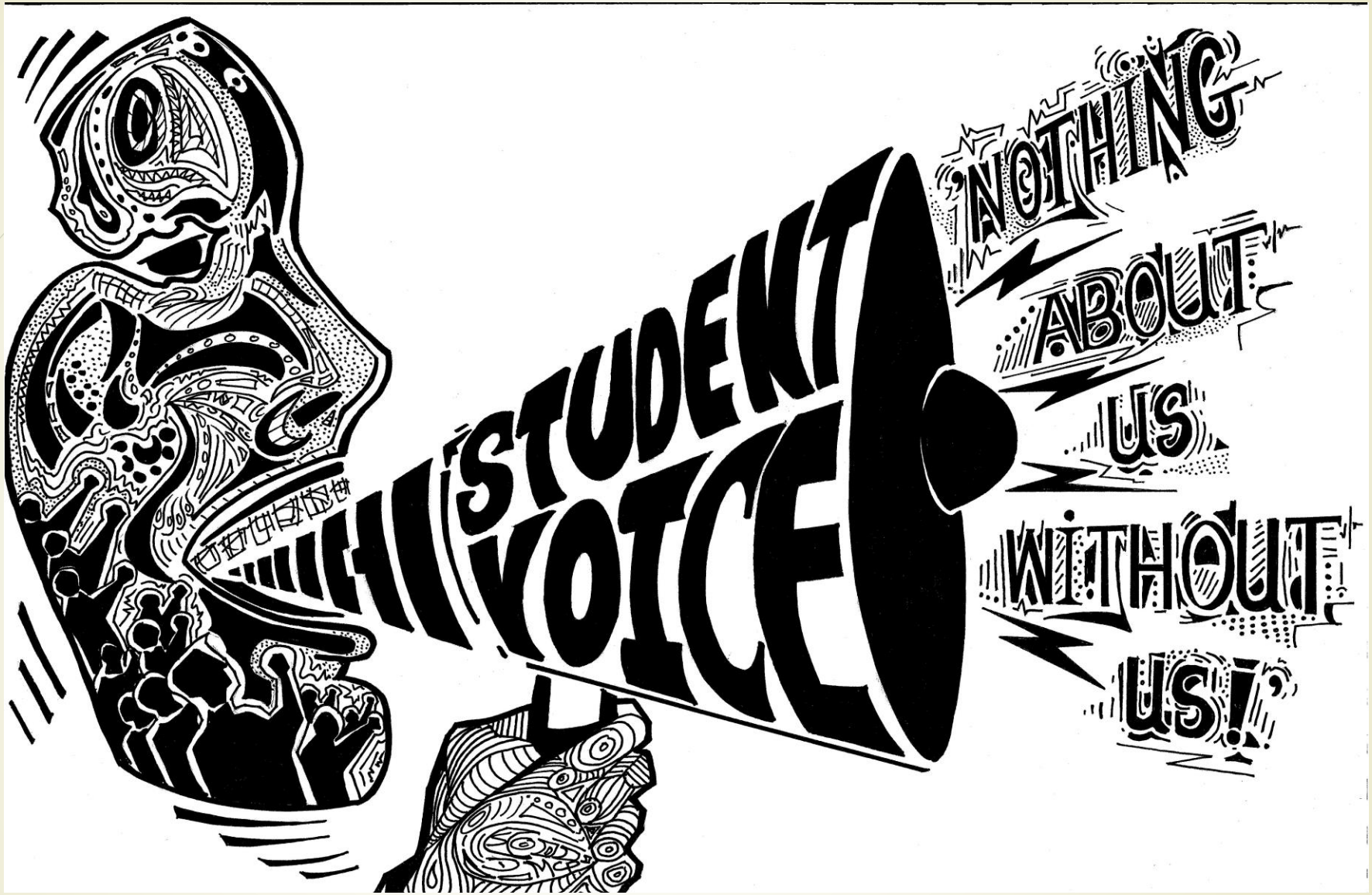
Learners' Voices: A Reflective Voice for Educational Leaders and Learners

Dr. Paula Flynn - @paula_flynn

16th November 2016

OVERVIEW

- Whose voices, and why listen?
- International and Irish research evidence and rationale for LV engagement?
- Findings, implications and conclusions with respect to LV consultation in relation to Junior Cycle Reform (NCCA publication, 2018)
- Relationship between 'voice' and 'inclusion/inclusive education' – transformative dialogue
- A Reflective Voice for Educational Leaders and Learners: 'the ***learner*** voice space'



With grateful thanks to Darren Byrne, Sarah Dempsey and Darren Causland, St Joseph's Secondary School, Rush

‘In the acoustic of the school, whose voice gets listened to?’

(Arnot et al. 2001)

Whose voices, why listen?

Irish based research and practice:

- Students identified with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (2008-12)
- NAPD: student led research – trust, relationships, inclusion, relevance of the student council (2012-2013)
- NCCA: curricular co-construction and development (2014-17)
- SCoTENs: teachers' beliefs about education and children's voice practices on the island of Ireland (collaboration with QUB, 2015-18)
- Supporting schools in preparation for and evaluation of change within a model of 'learner voice and theory of change' (Flynn and King 2018-2020)

Whose voices, why listen?

- Consultation and participation for learners encourages **learner engagement in learning, empowerment and student agency**
- Accessing learner perspectives on school problems and possible solutions reminds teachers and administrators that **children and teenagers possess unique knowledge and insights**
- Informed by learner insights on their experience of supports and obstacles to learning – there is potential to facilitate **leadership, ownership and responsibility** with respect to engagement and learning

Inclusive education…..a strategy for all children!

- **Reduced self esteem and low motivation** in children with learning difficulties (DES 2007, Heyman 1990, Smyth 2015, ValÅs 1999)
- Facilitating LV has the potential to **improve teacher-student relationships** and quality of school life for students (Davies 2005; Tangen 2009)
- Centrality of learner-teacher relationships and the classroom climate as **crucial influences on children's self image and wellbeing** (Smyth 2015)
- Significance of **links between student voice, relationships, attachment (connectedness/belonging) and impact on positive sense of wellbeing** (Anderson & Ronson 2004; ERO 2015; Flynn 2014 & 2015; Simmons, Graham and Thomas, 2015)

No limits!

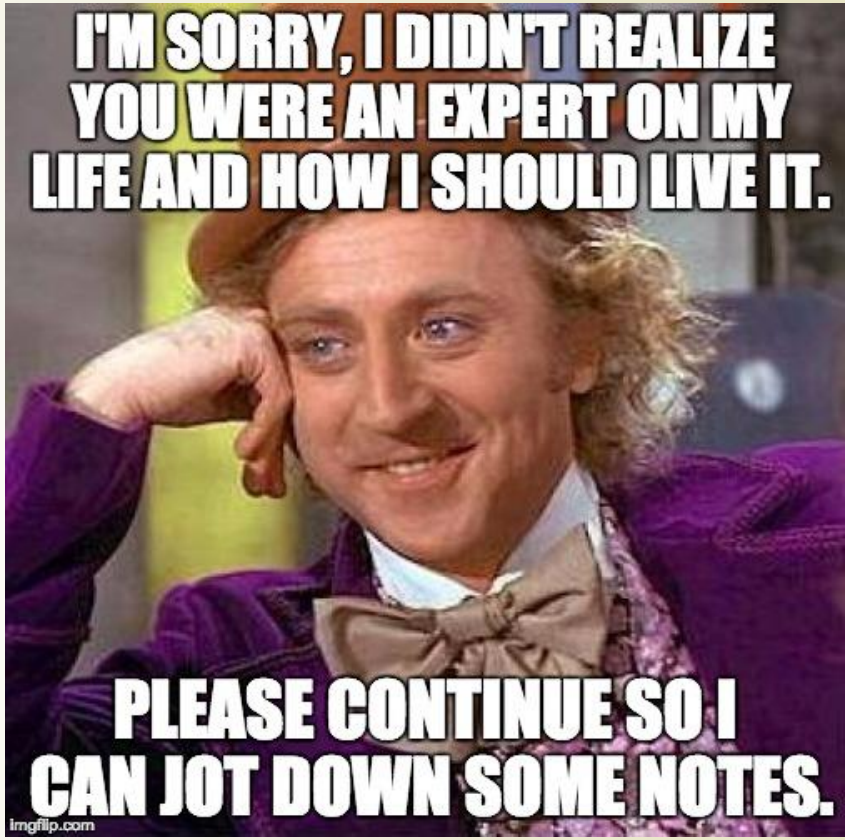
- Beyond ascertaining perspectives from young people - move towards a **more democratic process** of shared curricular development and co-construction as well as a **collective responsibility** for developing solutions in education environments (Bovill et al. 2011; Cook-Sather 2002; Fielding 2015; Shirley 2015).
- When student voice is linked to changing curriculum and instruction – impact on learning and **greater understanding of how they learn, stronger sense of own abilities** (Mitra 2003; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000)

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989

- **Article 12** - the right to express their views in matters effecting them and have their opinions given due weight commensurate with age and maturity
- ...appearing to listen to children is relatively unchallenging; giving due weight to their views requires real change. Listening to children should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means by which States make their interactions with children and their actions on behalf of children ever more sensitive to the implementation of children's rights (UN Committee 2003, p.4)

Authentic versus Tokenistic Listening

- (Lundy, 2007)
  - easy for adults to comply with outward signs of consultation and ultimately ignore children's views - tokenistic or decorative participation is not only in breach of Article 12 but can be counter-productive
- (Flynn, 2013)
  - When pupils are consulted seriously, it can make them feel, often for the first time, that their school and their class are to some extent ***their*** school and ***their*** class – impact on sense of belonging and attachment
  - Through consultation, we may deepen our understanding of marginalised groups



Hard to reach learners

- Disaffection
- Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties
- Additional needs

- A student who presents with internalising behaviours; for example, if they are shy, reticent, withdrawn, nervous, or anxious, is at risk of being ignored or rendered 'invisible'. The 'quiet child' is easily overlooked and vulnerable to internalising very low levels of self esteem which can be exacerbated if their needs are ignored (Collins, 1996)
- Students with SEBD 'are usually the least listened to, empowered and liked group' (Cefai and Cooper, 2010:4) Evidence that empowerment of students with SEBD can contribute to the resolution and prevention of some of the associated difficulties experienced by these students in school (Kroeger et al. 2004; Cefai & Cooper 2010)
- And yet, 'it is somewhat paradoxical that those pupils, who literally, often speak or shout loudest in the classroom, are those whose voices are most seldom heard' (Tangen, 2009:841).

'Why we want to participate in this student voice study'
I'm Invisible
I want somebody to listen to me and not just think I'm always wrong
I know I can help other people like me if you give me a chance
I 'm very unhappy and I hate school every day
I want to do I ME cuz I want to talk about school and why it makes me crazy
People get in me face over stupid things like runners and stuff but they have no clue what's really important
Teachers tell me I'm no good an' I know that's true but maybe this I'm ME thing will help somebody
I think if you listen to me and other kids here you'll learn what'll help other kids how to not feel like their rubbish
I 'll do it but I dont know why you want to talk to me, no 1 ever asks me nothing
Yeah if I can get out of some of me classes and you don't make me do homework

INCLUSION AND VOICE…

- **Internalised perspectives of difference**
- **Positive impact on student/teacher relationships** – significance for positive well-being (Flynn 2015, Smyth 2015)
- **Attachment and identity to school – connectedness and belonging**
- **Relational Care**
- **Power sharing does not undermine authority – encourages responsibility and ownership**
- **Leadership Potential**
  - Bottom up approach
  - Top down response

  "For me the most impressive outcome of the programme was witnessing the leadership potential among pupils I had personally identified as exclusion risks" (School Principal)

Three year Irish study – 20 schools and more than 350 students

1. To facilitate a process of student consultation on the development of new junior cycle curriculum specifications
2. To determine *how* to include student voice in education discourse for participating schools and the NCCA such that there is:
   - an embedded culture of listening
   - a strategy to support a sustainable structure and response to student voices.

Some shared learning from the experience….

- Expertise and value of shared expertise & experience for all participants
- Partnerships rather than data sources – potential model for future engagement in planning for and evaluating change – education discourse/transformative dialogue
- Sample – not representative – no homogenous voice!
- School culture & learner voice activity
- Opportunities to 'do more' – necessity for acknowledgment and evidence of impact
- Shared language within co-construction – avoidance of ***adult***eration/check interpretation
- Variety of media to facilitate breadth of learners' voices

Sustainable response and practice - inclusive model

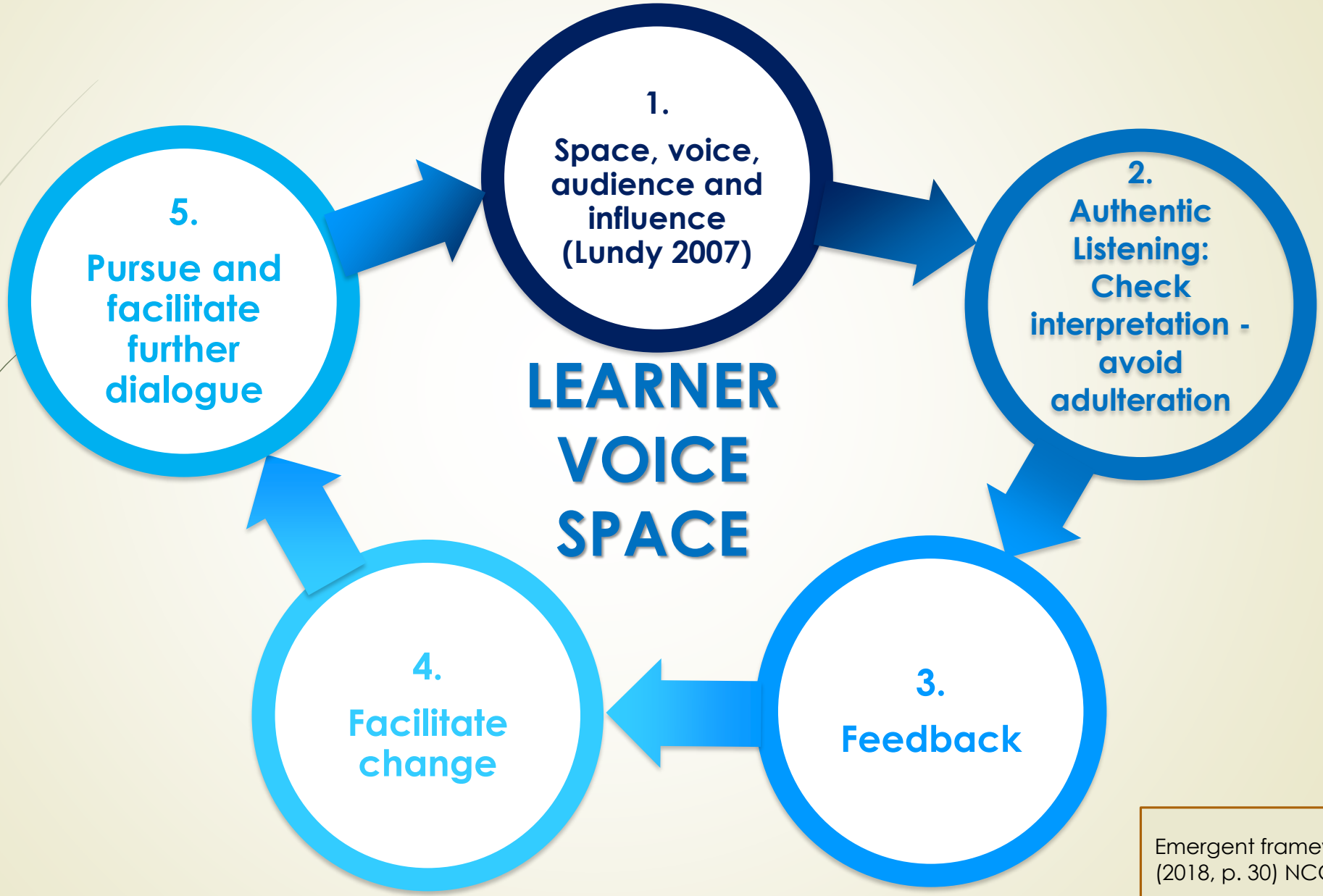
- Shared practice – opportunity for learning (all stakeholders) – pace persistence, patience
  - support for schools - dissemination and sharing
  - inter-agency
- Inextricable links: inclusive education/framework & voice – attitude and buy in!
- CPD for teachers – different skillset
- Leading by example – not confined to research and occasional projects! Habitual practice of learner discourse
- Significant links between 'voice'/being heard/having a say with 'positive learner-teacher relationships' **and** 'wellbeing'
- Commonalities in aspirations and goals for learning – the experience of day to day school environment - acknowledgement of which is key to progressing democratic, shared process and credible approach:
  - embed culture(s) of listening
  - support sustainable structure and response to learners' voices
- Leadership model – empowering and reflective – influence and innovation
  - Bottom up approach
  - Top down response

A Reflective Voice for Educational Leaders and Learners

&

‘the ***learner*** voice space’

TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE – INCLUSIVE FRAMEWORK



Emergent framework from Flynn, (2018, p. 30) NCCA publication

A challenge to education leaders and learners – ***all learners***

- What are the challenges, choices and changes required to support transformative dialogue within a learner voice space and how can YOU start the conversation?
- What roles do you envisage for 'all learners' in that space?
- What are the implications for initial teacher education (ITE), continuous professional development (CPD), school policy, local, regional and national school partnerships to support active agency and voice for learners?
- What does this mean to you, "*Nothing about us without us*"?

Thank you for listening!

Paula.Flynn@dcu.ie