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Exploring Student Participation Across Different Arenas of School Life

Authors: Anne Graham[1], Julia Truscott[1], Catharine Simmons[1], Donnah Anderson[2], Nigel Thomas[3]

Research was conducted via: Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, NSW, Australia

Author Affiliations:

[1] Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, NSW, Australia

[2] School of Psychology, Charles Sturt University, NSW, Australia

[3] School of Social Work, Care and Community, University of Central Lancashire, UK

Abstract (244 words):

Much has now been written on student participation at school. Yet a lack of conceptual clarity, contestation over purpose and benefits, and uncertainty about how to culturally embed and effectively facilitate participation in school contexts, continue to pose considerable challenges. This paper reports the qualitative findings from a large-scale, mixed method study that sought to explore how participation is perceived and practised in schools. The qualitative phase involved students from Years 7-10 (*n*=177) and staff (*n*=32) across ten government and Catholic secondary schools in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The data demonstrate that considerable efforts are being made in NSW schools to expand opportunities through which students might 'participate', with these explored across three key arenas of school life: the classroom; co-curricular activities, including formal participatory structures; and informal relational spaces. Although participatory opportunities were largely ad-hoc and often dependent upon the approach of individual teachers or school initiatives, differing enactments of childhood and adulthood were identifiable between the three arenas, along with varying expectations in this regard. The classroom emerged as a positive arena at present and one in which adult-child relations are beginning to become reconfigured. The co-curricular arena was much more contested, with the breadth of potential participatory opportunities perhaps distracting from the need to address underlying intergenerational issues. However, informal relational encounters between students and teachers were becoming increasingly egalitarian and these offer scope for creating the cultural preconditions such that student participation might expand more evenly across school life.

Key words: Student participation, student-teacher relationships, student voice, intergenerational

Introduction

There is considerable consensus in policy, practice and research that student participation, both at an individual and a system level, benefits both students and schools. Correspondingly, and in line with shifts in educational theory towards more collaborative approaches to learning, many schools are seeking to engage with discourses around 'student-centredness', 'personalised learning', 'student voice' and the like. Despite such interest, the notion of student participation remains beset by persistent definitional and conceptual ambiguity – it can be used to refer to anything from simply attending school and 'participating' in lessons to collaborative decision-making with adults (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Thomson & Holdsworth, 2003). Hence, while much has been written about student participation, including critical exploration of its historical background, how it might best be defined (Lundy, 2007; Thomson & Holdsworth, 2003) and typologies that describe the different forms it may take (over 30 according to Karsten, 2012), there remains an on-going need to more fully investigate how participation is being negotiated in everyday school life (Baroutsis et al., 2016; Horgan et al., 2017; Mannion, 2007; McCluskey et al., 2013; Percy-Smith, 2010).

This paper reports findings from the qualitative phase of a large scale, mixed methods study involving a mix of ten government and Catholic schools in Australia's most populous state, New South Wales (NSW). This phase was primarily interested in how participation at school is conceptualised by both students and staff; and how, where, under what conditions and for what purposes they experience participation. It involved focus group interviews with 177 secondary school students and individual interviews with 32 staff across the ten schools. The findings offer insight into the practice of student participation across school life and the ways in which adult-child relations are being reconfigured.

Background

Traditional schooling has largely been based upon a conceptualisation of children as 'becomings' who are taught by, and become, adults who are stable, contributing citizens. The emergence of the sociology of childhood (well over thirty years ago now) began to contest notions of adults as 'beings' and children as 'becomings' (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). This led to calls to reconsider not only the concept of childhood but also that of adulthood and the relations between them (in this case at school) (Lee 2001; Uprichard, 2008). These calls were galvanised further by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), which afforded children rights to participate in matters affecting their lives (Articles 12-15). Ever since, there has ensued an academic and political 'struggle' for the recognition of children as a social group (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Thomas, 2012), which continues to be played out in different arenas and relationships in which children might participate, not least of these being schools.

It is now well recognised in literature, although not always understood in practice, that student participation at school is influenced by the *social* and *spatial* context in which it occurs (see Arnot & Reay, 2007; Mannion, 2007, 2010; Percy-Smith, 2010). At an overarching level, opportunities for students to participate are influenced by school as an institution - school policy, processes, culture, structures and pedagogy, which in turn, are underpinned by adult beliefs and values regarding students' status and capabilities, and the purpose of schooling (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016; Mannion, 2010). Beyond this, it is also now well understood that the social and spatial context manifests in the form of power at an interpersonal level (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Mannion, 2007; Pearce & Wood, 2016; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Teachers typically hold hegemonic power in schools, with students expected to respect their authority, learn from their expertise and work to achieve a good grade, which can influence student readiness or ability to express their views freely (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). The views students express may also be tempered by their need to navigate power tensions amongst student sub-groups, hierarchical year pressures, and to balance allegiances between peer group acceptance and teacher approval (Lundy, 2007; Pearce & Wood, 2016; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Power issues also influence the reception of student perspectives, with adults holding the power to decide which student views (if any) are heard and how they are actioned (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Baroutsis et al., 2016; Lundy, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2010; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Complicating this further are the attitudes and beliefs regarding students' status, which act as a filter through which adults hear and interpret student perspectives (Arnot & Reay, 2007). In short, social and spatial influences affect *how* students can participate, *what* they say and how this is received and understood.

Lundy (2007) has argued that the UNCRC (UN, 1989) places an obligation on school systems to better address the social-spatial issues surrounding student participation. She has drawn attention to the way children's participatory rights (particularly Article 12, children's right to express their views and have these be given due weight) have been narrowly interpreted as 'voice'. She argues that 'voice' alone is limiting, and should be accompanied by the *space* for children to express their views, an *audience* who are listening, and scope for *influence*. Lundy has also drawn attention to other rights in the Convention that need to be upheld in tandem with participatory rights, to help further address the above kinds of social-spatial issues. Of particular note amongst these are rights connected to non-discrimination (Article 2) implying the need to ensure no student's views are marginalised at school; children's right to guidance (Article 5) which Lundy (2007) interprets as an obligation upon adults to facilitate participatory opportunities and support children to participate fully and effectively; and also children's rights to a holistic education that supports the development of the whole child (Articles 28 &29) (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016).

Such complexity reflects increasing acknowledgement that the *notion* of student participation is largely inextricable from considerations of the purpose and nature of schooling (Fielding 2004, 2006; Mannion 2007, 2010; Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016). It has long been recognised that the process of genuinely and openly listening to students is a transformative (or 'radical') process in that it will likely lead to the gradual challenging and subversion of current norms, reconfiguring the very structure, process

and experience of schooling (Fielding 2004, 2005; Pearce & Wood, 2016; Tisdall, Gadda & Butler, 2014). Perhaps because of this, schools in many countries have been slow to fully engage with the children's participation agenda (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016) or, as some scholars argue, have somewhat approached student participation as a neoliberal tool for engendering compliance with existing processes (Raby 2014).

An increasing body of literature asserts that if schools are to take seriously their obligations to uphold students' right to participation, a key place to begin is by shifting understandings of student participation from being about student *voice* to being about on-going intergenerational *dialogue* with associated collaborative planning and action (Fielding 2004, 2006; Horgan et al., 2017; Mannion 2007, 2010; Pearce & Wood, 2016; Percy-Smith, 2010; Wyness, 2012). As Mannion (2007, 2010) has argued particularly cogently, it is through intergenerational dialogue and collaboration that social-spatial issues will become apparent and worked through. He recommends that an important line of inquiry for student participation research, then, is to focus on *where* the shifts in power are currently occurring and how students participate 'in new forms of identity formation and learning within these spaces' (Mannion 2007, p. 410).

These 'spaces' might be situated within various arenas of school life – within the classroom, through non-formal learning opportunities (termed extra-curricular, extra-mural or co-curricular activities), in school decision-making structures, and in the informal 'hidden' aspects of daily school life (such as relational encounters with teacher and peers) (Mannion et al., 2015; Schereens, 2011). Across these arenas, identifying where shifts in power are occurring highlights the frontline of the 'struggle' for children and young people's recognition and participation in the most universal institution in their lives. These may well be the spaces in which 'different perfomativities of childhood and children's participation' might be played out and student-teacher relations might be reconstructed and improved (Mannion, 2007, p.415).

The study

This paper reports findings from a large-scale, mixed method study, entitled, *Improving Wellbeing through Student Participation at School*. The overall aim was to strengthen knowledge, policy and practice concerning student participation in NSW schools by identifying whether and how such participation improves students' social and emotional wellbeing. The study was conducted across four phases, with each phase framed by a guiding research question/s. This paper reports only upon data from the second phase of the study – the qualitative phase – which was guided by the following research question: How do students, teachers, principals and policy stakeholders currently understand and experience participation in NSW schools? This paper focuses on data gathered from students and teachers at the school level, with the policymaker data reported in an associated paper (currently under review).

Sample

In Australia, government and Catholic schools educate the majority (85.4%) of students (ABS, 2016). Accordingly, schools were recruited purposively for the qualitative phase, with the aim of including a wide range of schools from both sectors. In addition to sector (which it was hypothesised may bear influence on participation in terms of school ethos), diversity was sought in terms of school size, socioeconomic status, geographic (urban, rural, remote) characteristics and differing approaches to student participation. In total, ten schools were sampled across four different geographic areas of NSW. Five of the schools were recognised by the relevant Department of Education or Catholic Schools Office for their particular interest, efforts and/or innovation in improving opportunities for student participation at their school. As such, engagement with participation varied considerably across the sample.

The Principal of each of the ten schools was approached and invited for interview along with two teachers (one being a Head of Department or equivalent). Participation was entirely voluntary and the staff who took part generally had an interest or a role that involved student participation. In total, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with nine Principals and 23 teachers across the ten schools with a gender spread of females (n=13) and males (n=19).

Two student focus groups were also conducted at each school, one 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 research sought to hear from students from a range of learning backgrounds and with varying levels of participation and/or engagement at school (i.e., not just those perceived to be articulate and/or in leadership roles). To achieve this, schools were asked to recruit students randomly, via means such as every fifth or tenth student on the roll. Schools distributed and collected invitations and consent forms to these students and their parents. Again participation was voluntary and students' right to dissent was re-emphasised verbally to the students at the beginning of the focus groups. In total, 177 students participated in the focus groups across the ten schools.

Method

The interview and focus group schedules aimed to encourage participants to discuss and reflect upon what participation is, why it is important at school, how students currently participate, who supports this and what could be done differently at their school to improve participatory opportunities. The staff interviews followed a standard semi-structured individual interview approach. Focus groups were employed for the students as this method can help foster in-depth discussion of students' ideas and help reduce the adult-child power imbalances in research (Heary & Hennessy, 2002).

In line with the earlier discussion of social and spatial issues, it was recognised that, while focus groups may offer benefits when undertaking research with young people, socio-relational tensions may remain amongst the participants, and this may be particularly so amongst secondary students and within the school context. In an effort to address these, the focus group sessions differed from the staff interviews in that they

involved a number of activities in an effort to offer different platforms and modes through which students could contribute as well as acting as focal points to help facilitate discussion and reflection. The activities included opportunities to jot notes and reflect back upon them, the use of vignettes to stimulate discussion, a 'Being the Principal' activity to envision the changes needed to improve participation, and a mapping activity to consider the benefits and barriers to participation. The students were also introduced to a large model of Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation upon which they visually positioned the various participatory opportunities they identified at their school.

Data analysis

The interviews and the focus group discussions were recorded digitally and transcribed for analysis. The written material, maps and ladders generated during the focus group activities were also transcribed or a photograph of the work taken (no pictures of students in the focus groups were taken). All of this data was entered into the NVivo software program where it was coded for recurring themes and patterns. Initial themes were developed from the questions that had guided the schedules – the 'what, why, how, who' of participation, the barriers, and what could change. This was followed by deeper coding and analysis of the emergent themes within each of these areas, to better understand the processes and nuances across the schools. Through this process, 'space' arose as an important theme, with different expectations and experiences of participation, and different enactments of childhood and adulthood identifiable between different arenas of school life. These aspects are the primary focus of this article.

Ethics

Ethics approval was gained from the institution's Human Research Ethics Committee and subsequent approval was granted by the participating school systems (approval numbers: ECN-15-017 and SERAP 2015147). As indicated above, written informed consent was sought from staff, the students' parents and the students themselves. Students and staff also had the opportunity to opt out on the day. The research sought to afford confidentiality and anonymity for all participants and any participant could ask for the recording to be stopped at any time and sections of the interview (or focus group) to be erased, if desired. At a system level, schools and school systems were assured that the research was exploratory and that they would not be directly compared with other schools. In addition to these routines of good ethical research practice, ethics was approached as an ongoing 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).

Findings

The majority of schools were operating traditional 'business as usual' approaches to compulsory schooling, although trialling new approaches to existing systems and structures and introducing supplementary initiatives. Two schools had fully adopted problem and project-based approaches to learning (PBL), in which students are much more central to their learning journey. Therefore, while endeavouring to uphold our

commitment not to compare the schools, there was considerable variation between individual schools in terms of commitment and progress surrounding student participation. However, rather than school ethos / sector, or school demographic or geographic factors, differences largely seemed dependent upon the approach of the Principal and / or individual teachers. Indeed, aside from the PBL schools, intergenerational dialogue and any associated power shifts in adult-child relations were largely occurring in small, ad-hoc enclaves within schools. As one Principal commented: *'At the moment it's just very much skimming the surface and we do something, "Oh that wasn't a bad idea…" but it's not really embedded, it doesn't have that well, fine-tuned and rounded approach'* (Principal, School A).

In unpacking the findings, we turn first to a brief synthesis of the findings in relation to *understandings* of participation before focusing on key findings concerning where and how participation is *experienced.*

Multi-layered understandings of participation

In line with on-going complexity surrounding the definition of student participation, students and staff grappled with the term 'student participation' in the focus groups and interviews. Commonly, the participants tried to explain their understandings through other terms or concepts, with notions of 'voice' referring 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)* continuing to predominate.

Staff generally perceived greater complexity between voice and participation: *'To me student participation is different than student voice, although voice could be seen as participation' (Principal, School C).* As such, they drew on a broader range of terms particularly student involvement, engagement or ownership, in an effort to articulate their understandings of participation. However, they quickly ran into the tensions between student participation, and the education system as it currently stands:

> *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)*

> *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?... (Teacher, School E)*

Some staff sought to reconcile the complexity by describing participation along a continuum, whereby various levels are evident:

> *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)*

Notably though, and even in more considered ideas, staff understandings tended to focus on the student – *student* engagement or *students* being actively involved in school, learning and in steering their life journey – rather than intergenerational dialogue or more egalitarian relations.

As student discussions progressed, most extended their ideas beyond voice and some, particularly those based in schools offering PBL programs, came to frame participation in relation to almost all aspects of school life:

> *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)*

Further, towards the end of almost all of the focus groups there were students who came closer to articulating ideas connected to a need to reconfigure adult-child relations, with participation frequently asserted in terms of greater *equality* between students and teachers: *'Where the students have an equal voice with the teachers and the school' (Year 9-10, School G).*

Overall though, it was notable that there was very little clarity regarding understandings of participation even within individual schools, despite most actively seeking to offer increased opportunities for students to 'participate'.

Where and how participation is experienced

Despite the participatory opportunities reported being largely ad-hoc within individual schools, it was possible to identify the key spatial arenas where participation was occurring *across* the schools. Differentiating between these different arenas not only builds a picture of where and how participation is currently experienced and facilitated in the schools, it pointed to inconsistencies in adult-child relations and differing expectations. That is, it became evident that the 'struggle' to reconfigure adult-child relations is not a consistent 'frontline' across school life – the process is at differing stages in different arenas even within the same school. The following three arenas are explored below (which largely correlate with the four arenas of school life previously identified by Mannion et al., 2015):

- The classroom
- Co-curricular activities (including formal participatory structures)
- Informal spaces

The classroom

The classroom did not tend to be identified first when students or teachers discussed participatory opportunities at school. Yet, across the schools, the classroom setting emerged as a key space of change and innovation in terms of student participation, with many new approaches and initiatives being trialled. These included the adoption of

'restorative justice' approaches, which offer students greater participation in behavioural issues, plus various small-scale techniques to involve students in the teaching and learning cycle, such as creating the marking scheme that they would be assessed against.

Most schools were also endeavouring to offer students small on-going opportunities to experience a sense of participation by offering them choices in relation to how they produce their school work, such as choosing the focus of a project or the mode of assignments (making a video or writing an essay etc.). In many of the schools this seemed to be a relatively 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).* The students described really appreciating these opportunities in the classroom setting, despite their participatory scope being quite limited.

Where schools had gone beyond offering small choices and embraced PBL approaches, these were also very favourably discussed by both students and staff. Participants at these schools valued the approaches for the way in which they engaged students, helped to build community relationships, and as a way of offering students a sense of participation in their own learning journey:

> *It's hopefully designed to make sure that students can come up with different outcomes and that we're not just channeling them towards that one goal. (Teacher, School H)*

It was notable that in other schools there was much less clarity regarding the relationship between student participation and students' learning needs, and the ambiguity around definitions of student participation was creating conflation between participation and classroom engagement. For instance, some teachers described with enthusiasm innovative and fun projects they had organised to deliver the curriculum content, such as asking students to develop computer games to display their Mathematics knowledge or to compete to come up with the best investment of a lottery win. Whilst not diminishing the uniqueness and creativity of these ideas, it was evident from the narratives that these often followed the teachers' interests:

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

As such, sometimes teachers' enthusiasm to be more creative in their teaching meant that opportunities for meaningful student participation (i.e., for intergenerational dialogue) rather than teacher-driven engagement were being overlooked.

A particularly important aspect of participation in the teaching and learning cycle is the opportunity for students to give feedback on the effectiveness of lessons. It was clear that this form of participation can be particularly fraught with tensions because it challenges the dominant norms of authority, expertise and power, and requires navigation of delicate inter-personal dynamics: *'It's hard because…they might take it personally and they might not, but it just depends' (Yr 7-8, School D).* Therefore, in

many cases students' opportunities to participate in this way were described as being dependent upon individual teachers who were open and receptive:

> *We had a [pre-service] teacher and he just sort of [asked] at the end of each lesson, "What do you guys reckon we should do next lesson? What do you need help with?" ... It was good…you know, you could say what you didn't understand and things like that. (Yr 9-10, School A)*

Given the centrality of this form of student participation to the core business of schools, one school had sought to formalise the feedback process. They had created a student feedback group in which students were trained in observation techniques and in providing constructive feedback to teachers. All teachers had to nominate one lesson per term to be observed by members of the group (or alternatively they could choose to be observed by another teacher) and at the time of the study it was noted that there was considerable interest from students in joining the group. This is an important example because this was adult-initiated opportunity that strongly subverted traditional adult-child power hierarchies. Coordinating staff described their hopes that this formal process might help stimulate more informal dialogue between students and teachers around learning and lesson effectiveness.

Lastly, the opportunity for students to nominate elective subjects, although long-standing practice, was often cited as an example of participation in the classroom arena. Rather than students' options being limited by timetabling, staffing and class sizes, two of the schools had gone to extraordinary lengths to privilege student preferences within the process. The schools (and notably these were not those who had adopted PBL) offered the widest possible range of electives, and then provided staffing based on student choices: *'We don't have any predetermined lines or anything. The kids totally set the curriculum pattern in the senior school' (Head of Department, School I).* Clearly, this approach had significant implications, for instance at one of the schools almost half of the staff were employed on casual or temporary contracts. Yet, despite such hurdles, it was felt that this flexible approach to subject choices offered *'massive benefits' (Principal, School C)*, with both students and teachers being more enthusiastic towards the subjects taught.

Overall, in both student and staff narratives, the classroom was perceived as a very positive space in terms of student participation:

> *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)*

> *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 suggests, by and large, the students respected teachers' position as experts and professionals in the classroom arena. They appreciated teachers' efforts to offer them limited choices and did not, at present, seek further influence in this arena.

Co-curricular activities

When discussing the opportunities to participate at their school most teachers' and students' thoughts turned first to the structures designed to formally offer students a 'voice'. Various committees or leadership models were in place across the schools, with the most frequently discussed being the long-standing Student Representative Council (SRC). In addition, the numerous other special interest groups and clubs that comprise school community life were described as offering opportunities for student participation.

Some participants considered being involved in these activities, such as being a member of a sports team or the debating club to be an act of participation. There was a sense that by actively choosing to be involved in such non-compulsory activities students were 'participating' in the school community. Other committees or groups, including the SRC as well as fundraising groups or social event committees offered opportunities for members not only to put themselves forward to be part of the group, but to participate further by actively *doing* something for their school or wider community. However, students' experiences in this latter regard were mixed.

The sense amongst most students and staff was that many formal participatory structures, such as the SRC, do not work particularly well, with various social-spatial issues consistently raised. Many of the problems discussed were inter-student issues, such as that formal committee structures only offer a voice to a small number of students or that there are communication issues between student representatives and the wider student body. While both students and staff raised these issues, staff tended to focus upon these as key to why the structures did not function well. Correspondingly, where schools had attempted to improve on formal structures, the improvements tended to seek to address these issues, such as having representatives from each class, having a range of special interest committees, or doing away with the election of committee members and having an open forum to which any student could turn up.

However, while students spoke of inter-student issues, more diminishing from their perspective, was the perpetuation of intergenerational power through formal structures. Across the schools, students believed that committee members' opportunities for 'voice' occurred within narrow parameters or had limited influence. For instance, students described that if they joined a special interest committee they tended to have fairly fixed organisational tasks, such as to organise an annual event (e.g., a fundraiser, sports carnival or school ball). In these instances students spoke of having 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)*

Correspondingly, the students felt that they were largely following a pre-determined process, making participation feel forced and laborious and draining their enthusiasm: '*It was a lot of work for not much' (Yr 7-8, School C).*

In general, students were most enthusiastic about opportunities to initiate 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. (Year 7-8, School H)*

When these 'new' events went well they were held up by staff as examples of the strength and benefits of participation:

> *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 of Department, School E)*

However, some students felt their school had little interest in new 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 limited time to support or respond to these. In schools where participation was less established, 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 think they want to have a say, but when it comes down to the coal face...they don't do anything…they have the idea and then they want the adults to do all the work (Teacher, School B).*

Other teachers found students' desire to initiate new ideas frustrating, explaining that if something had been decided or organised by students several years ago then the current cohort of students *'feel like it's not current… If it wasn't [them] or [their] year group then they're not interested' (Teacher, School A).*

In addition to teacher frustration, students also frequently described being left frustrated or disappointed with the process or extent of student participation opportunities in the co-curricular arena:

> *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 our suggestions should be taken [on board]. (Yr 9-10 Focus Group, School F)*

The following narrative captures the negative cycle that often seemed to surround many formal or on-going participatory structures in schools:

> *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)

There were only a few examples of on-going initiatives in the co-curricular arena that were perceived by both students and staff to work well. In one school, students had initiated a community youth club and the on-going running of the group was still student-led with subsequent year groups appearing to be proud of the club's student-initiated roots. 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 enjoyed longer-term success because they offered subsequent cohorts of students scope to influence the direction and/or activities of the groups. Essentially, the on-going nature of these initiatives meant that the initial struggle to reconfigure adult-child roles had been worked through - the operating process through which adults supported students was established. Yet, this was set up in such a way that students could initiate new ideas, offering a sense of contribution and influence that continued to feel fresh.

Largely, in contrast to the classroom, there was considerable intergenerational tension around the process and extent of student participation in the co-curricular arena. In accordance, many opportunities, including formal structures in particular, were consistently positioned by students as tokenistic (on Hart's ladder). This emerged as an arena of resistance and misrecognition – a space in which traditional adult-child relations are largely reinforced, despite aims to the contrary.

Informal relational spaces

As highlighted earlier, notions of dialogue did not emerge strongly when participants tried to explain their understandings of participation. However, when discussing their experiences of participation, both students and staff highlighted the importance of informal intergenerational conversation and relationship-building. This was raised as a space for participation *in its own right* (being known by and knowing others in the school community) as well as being *foundational to* student participation in the above arenas. It merits noting here that there was a tendency by students to conflate notions of a 'good teacher' with those who support their participation. Yet, it emerged that for many students having a staff member who is approachable and takes consideration of their personal circumstances is simultaneously perceived as facilitating a sense of participation because it makes them feel acknowledged and validated as a human *being*.

Connected to this, students conveyed their need to feel they can trust adults in order to participate at school (with trust also being established through the process). It was believed that trust could be fostered through creating opportunities for informal conversation (relationship-building) and more transparent communication following

student input into decisions. One other key idea to emerge, was the need for teachers to actively and purposively scaffold the development of students' participatory skills (such as in negotiation, compromise, coordinating a plan etc.). That is, to go beyond merely offering opportunities for students to participate but to be proactive in supporting them to do so effectively:

> *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)*

While this seems obvious, data on the co-curricular activities above suggested that this was not explicitly understood in many schools. As highlighted in that section, some teachers found student participation a frustrating process and did not seem to make the connections between student ownership, skill development and the relational aspects. These connections were much more understood in the PBL schools, where it was apparent that positioning teachers in a scaffolding role feels familiar, while still offering considerable scope for a shift and reconfiguration of adult-child relations. Of course, in the absence of a clear definition of student participation as being centred upon intergenerational dialogue, there is a risk that the facilitation of participatory skills becomes part of the curricular content – a one-way process, rather than an opportunity for intergenerational dialogue and 'becoming'.

The above findings have highlighted a breadth of participatory *opportunities* across three key *arenas* within schools, with considerable evidence of creative initiatives and approaches being implemented. While changing enactments of adulthood and childhood are emerging across the arenas, opportunities remain largely dependent upon the commitment of individual teachers or school leaders.

Discussion

The data gathered during this study highlights that there are considerable efforts being made in NSW schools to expand opportunities through which students might 'participate', despite a general lack of clarity over what student participation actually means. The findings clustered around three arenas of school life, with changing 'performativities of adulthood and childhood' (Mannion, 2007, p.415) within and between these, as explored further here.

The classroom emerged as a very positive space, despite remaining largely one in which adults held the power and student participation was contained and channeled – largely centred upon opportunities to make small choices. While appearing to bestow a level of power to students, some of the choices described offered a fairly limited form of participation in that they were easily incorporated into existing school systems with little challenge to existing adult-child relations. Nevertheless, these choices *felt* meaningful to students. This may have arisen from the sense of innovation and novelty, a general increase in intergenerational dialogue in the classroom (such as the widespread uptake in restorative justice approaches) and considerably lower expectations on the part of students regarding the level of voice and influence they

might have (compared to the co-curricular arena in particular). It is also possible that making choices in the classroom were popular because often each student's choice could be realised – an individual student could choose to deliver an assignment by video and then do so. Regardless, it seems likely that the sense of positivity may continue to fuel further growth. There is not a great leap from choosing the form of assessment and participating in the development of the marking scheme, to participating in the lesson planning process and in decisions about the direction and development of lines of inquiry, altogether more radical or transformative forms of student participation (Fielding, 2004, 2006; Pearce & Wood, 2016; Tisdall et al., 2014). It was clear, then, that the classroom is a changing arena, albeit one in which intergenerational 'struggle' (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Thomas, 2012) was not being experienced overtly at the relational interface. Rather, teachers and school leaders themselves seemed to be wrestling with changing conceptions of childhood and adulthood as well as the need to differentiate between notions such as participation and classroom engagement, and students were receptive to the gradual expansion of participatory opportunities as they arose.

By contrast, in the co-curricular space across the schools, an identifiable intergenerational 'struggle' was taking place (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Thomas, 2012). Through comparing where the students positioned participatory opportunities on Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, it was evident that students had much higher expectations of the process participation in the co-curricular arena than in the classroom setting. Where adults sought to contain student participation by channelling openings through pre-determined committees, students were pushing to initiate activities in which they had a greater sense of influence and ownership. There were some positive examples of activities that had emerged from this process – a student dance party, an on-going student-led youth club and a student media group. However, these were individual examples, with little sense of clarity amongst schools regarding the recipe to repeat this success.

As existing literature has signalled (Lundy, 2007; Wyness, 2012), students are reliant upon adult gatekeepers to give the go-ahead for new events or activities and, often, upon adult support to facilitate their knowledge and skills to see an idea through to fruition. In the schools in the study, when students sought to initiate a new activity, the level of support needed was not always forthcoming or possible. When student ideas failed there was a sense that it served to reinforce adult beliefs about students' capabilities and status, rather than being acknowledged as a failure to scaffold students' skills at the adult-child interface (a breach of UNCRC Article 5 as conceptualised by Lundy (2007)). Indeed, in most cases it seemed schools were seeking to manifest 'successful' student participation in the co-curricular arena through constricting the scope of student agency. This was occurring either in relation to the organisation of specific events or activities or, as others have described, via the set-up of organisational structures (such as SRCs) (Lundy, 2007; Horgan et al., 2017; Percy-Smith 2010; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Thus, despite aims to the contrary, many opportunities in the co-curricular arena were perpetuating a normative performativity of childhood and adulthood.

This performativity was somewhat reinforced further by efforts to improve upon the SRC model. Efforts largely targeted issues *amongst* students, without concurrent attention to the *intergenerational* power issues. Addressing inter-student issues are important in upholding UNCRC Article 2 (non-discrimination). However, affording students a platform to have a say without this being given 'due weight' by those in decision-making roles (i.e., influence or a sense of dialogue with adult stakeholders) compromises their rights under Article 12. This has been a perennial issue in the likes of formal student participatory structures (Quinn & Owen, 2016). It may be that the on-going expansion of potential participatory opportunities in the co-curricular arena is acting as a distraction from schools tackling these underlying issues.

Lastly, participants discussed informal relationship building as a space through which students experience a sense of participation, and also as being foundational to participation in the other arenas. Where this relationship building and informal conversation is intergenerational, it represents a shift from traditional positionings of students and teachers in schools, diluting the hierarchical divide and elevating students to a more egalitarian standing as fellow human beings (Baroutsis et al., 2016; Horgan et al., 2017; Lee, 2001; Mannion, 2007, 2010; Uprichard, 2008). In a sense, then, there was something of a mismatch between participants' lived experiences (and lived understandings) of participation and their conscious comprehension of the concept. It would seem that more clearly defining student participation as being about intergenerational dialogue and on-going collaboration would assist by helping schools more directly attend to the cultural conditions and foundations (such as the strengthening of student-teacher relationships and the facilitation of students' skills) so that participatory experiences might expand more evenly across school life.

Conclusion

Across the ten secondary schools involved in this study a wide range of approaches and initiatives were being implemented in an effort to strengthen student participation. These clustered around three key arenas of school life: the classroom; co-curricular activities (including formal participatory structures); and informal relational spaces. Differing enactments of childhood and adulthood were identifiable between the three arenas, along with different expectations in this regard. Somewhat connected to this, it became apparent that participation was, or could be, experienced in four key ways:

- As having *voice* (listening to students' perspectives);
- As having *influence* (recognising student perspectives such that they might effect change at school);
- As making a *choice*; and/or,
- As a process of *working together* (intergenerational dialogue and on-going collaboration).

Overall, there was a general trend towards increased intergenerational equality and dialogue in schools. However, opportunities for participation were largely ad-hoc within and across the different arenas of school life, often being dependent upon the approach of individual teachers or the school initiatives in place. This points to the need

for policy to more explicitly reflect an emphasis on integrated, whole-school approaches to student participation that encompass intergenerational dialogue and collaboration regardless of arena. The four elements of participation listed above might be considered key avenues by which schools could seek to progress student participation across school life.

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