Student Agency – A Case Study of Primary School Aged Children

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor any material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for any degree or diploma or a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Abstract

This research examines student agency in the context of children's learning in Year 4-6 classrooms in a primary school. Mitra (2004) discusses the benefit of student agency as "student outcomes will improve and school reform will be more successful if students actively participate in shaping it" (p. 652). Specifically, the research critically examined the use of 'student voice' in classrooms as a vehicle for student agency, the benefits teachers and students ascribe to 'voice', and teachers' and students' perceptions of the influence of student voice on learning.

A qualitative case study approach was employed for this research in order to gather data about an under-researched aspect of primary school education in New Zealand. Interviews and focus groups were the main research tools used to gather data. The research was guided by three key questions:

- How do teachers and leaders define 'student agency' and 'student voice'?
- What mechanisms/practices do they identify as important?
- How do students define and describe 'student agency' and 'student voice' and what impact do they believe this has on their learning?

Data from both interviews and the focus group was gathered, collated and then analysed. One principal, one senior leader and two teachers participated in the interviews and 12 children formed two separate focus groups. The findings identified three key themes. These were: the meaning and scope of the terms 'student voice' and 'student agency' were not well understood by teachers and leaders; teachers, leaders and students do want students to have 'more say' in what and how they learn, but this is not 'true' student voice or student agency; and, there is a power imbalance between adults (albeit, unrealised by the adults) and students. Overall, the findings showed that teachers' and leaders' perceptions were marred by their misunderstanding of the terms and actioned at a basic level.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

This research originated from a discussion with colleagues about student agency and student voice and wanting to find out the answers to these questions – Were they one and the same thing? How are they perceived by school leaders, teachers and students? The varied answers that came from this professional discussion set me up to find out more about student voice and student agency in an education setting. This chapter outlines the rationale for researching perceptions held by school leaders, teachers and students of student voice and student agency and how they influence learning. My research aims and questions are outlined in this introductory chapter and I conclude this chapter describing how this dissertation is organised and an outline of the purpose of each chapter.

Rationale

The rationale for this research came from the fact that very little research has been carried out in New Zealand in the areas of student voice and student agency, or the impact this may have on student learning. Overseas research (Klemenčič, 2015; Murphey, Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009; Quinn and Owen, 2016; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012) identifies a direct link between student agency and student motivation and engagement. These aspects are also linked with raised student achievement, due in part to student motivation being increased when the student has more autonomy over what and how they learn. Furthermore, literature supports the fact that students who have more agency in their schooling years are more likely to become successful citizens who contribute positively as adults to the wider community (Morgan & Streb, 2001; O'Brien, 2011; Ranson, 2000; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

My thinking around this research was to investigate the perceptions that New Zealand educators and students hold about 'student voice' and 'student agency'. Research shows that students lacking in motivation, engagement and voice in their learning can lead to there being "no authenticity in the learning" (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p.33). As students move from being passive learners to taking more of a role in 'voicing' their opinions and being more actively involved in decision making in regard to curriculum and learning experiences, they can demonstrate greater student agency.

Research aims and questions

The aim of this research was to identify and critically examine educators' (teachers and leaders) beliefs and practices in regard to student voice and agency, and to critically examine children's perceptions in regards to having 'voice' and 'agency' and the impact it has on their learning.

In order to investigate this aim, I endeavoured to answer the following questions:

- How do teachers and leaders define 'student agency' and 'student voice', and what mechanisms/practices do they identify as important?
- How do students define and describe 'student agency' and 'student voice', and what impact do they believe this has on their learning?

Scope of the study

I chose to undertake an interpretative qualitative methodological approaches for this research to keep the focus directly on the participants' views. The data collected are from one contributing New Zealand primary school (one that caters for students from the ages of 5-10). The school principal, one senior leader, two teachers and two student focus groups were involved in gathering the data that underpins this research.

Dissertation organisation

This dissertation is organised into six chapters.

Chapter One introduces the research and provides the rationale for the research aim and questions.

Chapter Two critically evaluates the relevant literature to student agency and student voice using both international and New Zealand (although somewhat limited) research.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological framework and process used to undertake this research within a qualitative case study approach. This chapter also describes data collection and analysis process. The issues of validity and trustworthiness have been addressed along with the ethical issues relevant to the research.

Chapter Four provides a summary of the findings of this research identified from the data obtained from the interviews and focus group study. Key themes from these discussions are indicated in this chapter.

Chapter Five discusses the findings outlined in chapter four with reference to literature. This chapter considers where other research supports this research, and also where this research identifies new themes.

Chapter Six presents the conclusion of this study and recommendations for further research are made.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature in regard to 'student agency' and 'student voice'. The chapter begins with a brief history of the concepts of student voice and student agency and reviews the definitions of both terms as identified in research. Following this, I provide my own definitions of these terms as they will be referred to in the following chapters. This chapter then describes three important factors that are linked to the involvement of student voice and student agency in educational settings: benefits and impact of student voice and student agency; student capability and participation in decision making; and challenges and successes for student voice and student agency. Most of the literature used in this chapter comes from countries outside of New Zealand, as there is limited comparable local literature that I have been able to locate that is concerned with 'student voice 'and 'student agency'.

The history of student voice and agency

The terms 'student voice' and 'student agency' date back to the early 1960s with the literature indicating that students in American classrooms were involved in decision-making, both in classrooms and school wide, in the 1960s and early 1970s (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2004). However, this use seemed to diminish somewhat in the mid-1970s. During this time, Mitra (2004) noted that many young students faced increasing alienation due to large class sizes, age and ability segregation in classes, and that students were related to as clients, rather than as collaborators in learning. This change forged a divide between students and teachers where students believed that they were not listened to and important decisions about their education were made without their input (Mitra, 2004). Cook-Sather (2006) notes that between the early 1970s and 1990s, student voice had been 'missing' from education settings and highlighted the concept that listening to the ideas of the students was a way forward in teaching and learning. Following the re-emergence of student voice in the mid-1990s within educational settings in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, Mitra (2004) noted that the new focus would serve as a catalyst of change to improve teaching and learning within schools, stating that "student outcomes will improve and school reform will be more successful if students actively participate in shaping it" (p. 652).

New Zealand literature on this subject is extremely limited. However, New Zealand joined the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC, 1989) in 1993 and was obliged to adhere to the provisions within that document. One being Article 12 which states, " parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) thanks many people who contributed to the development of the revised version, however, students were not named as contributors.

The definitions of 'student voice' and 'student agency' vary widely in educational literature and this is discussed in depth in the next section.

Student voice and student agency – definitions

The definitions of 'student voice' and 'student agency' in the literature are often similar and used interchangeably. Student voice has been defined in many ways, but most often included within definitions are the words consultation, participation, collaboration, leadership and intergenerational learning (Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca & Artiles, 2017; Klemenčič, 2012; Mitra, Serriere & Stoicovy, 2012; Pereira, Mouraz & Figueiredo 2013). In a literal sense, student voice can be defined as the speech and perspectives of the speaker. At a simple level, Mitra et al. (2012) define student voice as "young people sharing their opinions of school problems with administration and faculty" (p. 104). Gonzalez et al. (2017) categorise student voice as "a field of study that attempts to capture the voice, ideas, or perspectives of students for the purposes of (a) school change, (b) student or group empowerment, (c) to teach and learn the school curriculum" (p. 456). Involving students in the educational process and listening to what they say is discussed by Pereira et al., (2013) as being student voice, "as well as allowing them to be heard and have an active role in the decision-making process in the classroom" (p. 938). These ideas are paramount to understanding student voice. Student voice is not just students talking or offering ideas, but being active participants in all areas within the education system with adults listening to and acting upon students' ideas. Cook-Sather (2006) discusses 'student voice' in its most profound and radical form, calling "for a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sounds but also to the presence and power of students" (p. 363).

'Student agency' can be broadly defined as not simply knowing about and having the power to act, but actually undertaking action. The concept of 'student agency' is seen as students collaborating with staff to address wider school concerns and decision-making (Klemenčič, 2015). Klemenčič (2015) provides a more in-depth understanding of student agentic engagement, stating that agentic students are more self-reflective, show intentional action and interaction with their environment, and make noticeable decisions within their school setting. Student agency is not something that a child has or can possess but, as Biesta, Priestly and Robinson (2015) state, agency is, "rather to be understood as something that people do or achieve'' (p. 3). Educators must consider how agentic behaviour is reflected in day-to-day decisions, not simply being satisfied that they are just listening to what students say, instead of promoting student agency. Student agency is acknowledged in The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) as, "Students have a sense of agency when they feel in control of things that happen around them; when they feel that they can influence events. This is an important sense for learners to develop. They need to be active participants in their learning" (p. 37).

There is confusion in regard to the many ways the literature describes the terms 'student voice' and 'student agency' (Bolstad, 2011). Bolstad (2011) prefers to use the term 'youth-adult partnership' rather than 'student voice', seeing it as the relationship between adult and youth, the potential to contribute to decision making and promote change. As this section describes, not only are the terms often described in a similar vein, but the benefits and impact of both 'student voice' and 'student agency' are of equal importance in an education setting. For the purpose of this study, the definition of 'student voice' is deemed to be, *students having a say in classroom and wider educational aspects of their school lives that affect them.* 'Student agency' is defined as *students having the freedom to act and speak about decision making in curriculum design, school policies and procedures and having this enacted upon.*

Benefits and impact of student voice and agency

The idea that student voice and student agency is vitally important in the learning process is widely discussed (Bolstad, 2011; Ranson, 2000). Ranson (2000) discusses the idea that giving students voice and agency over their learning is empowering and encourages students to learn to discriminate, judge, choose and to become decision makers. Students who are more pro-active in decision making about their learning and about school-wide decisions that affect them, can be linked to higher student motivation and enhancement

of both the learning and the conditions under which they learn (Biddulph, 2011; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

Within the education system, students have rarely been involved in curriculum planning and student voice has often been marginalised and not acted on, if heard at all. Rudduck and Flutter (2000) state: "This traditional exclusion of young people from the consultative process, this bracketing out of their voice, is founded upon an outdated view of childhood which fails to acknowledge children's capacity to reflect on issues affecting their lives" (p 86). Allowing students the opportunity to be involved in making choices around what they learn is widely seen as best practice for raising student achievement (Biddulph, 2011; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Curriculum making and policy development is an area that has been situated mainly within the realms of senior leadership teams. However, students do have the ability and are more motivated when they are involved in the planning and preparation of curriculum design (Cook-Sather, 2006; Jagersma & Parsons, 2011; Murphey et al., 2009; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Students who were involved in building and environmental projects (Flutter & Rudduck, 2005) noted a sensitivity to the culture and traditions of the school community.

Many researchers discuss this aspect of student agency benefiting students in the wider community (Morgan & Streb, 2001, O'Brien, 2011; Ranson, 2000; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). The literature suggests if students do not have the opportunities to exercise their voice and agency within the classroom setting, it is unlikely that society would expect them to be able to exercise this effectively outside the classroom. O'Brien (2011), Ranson (2000) and Quinn and Owen (2016) support this argument, discussing one area that student agency offers is that students are well prepared to live and work in real world environments. Through researching a service-learning project, Morgan and Streb (2001) concluded that "When students have real responsibilities, challenging tasks, helped to plan the project, and made important decisions, involvement in service-learning projects had significant and substantive impacts on students' increases in self-concept, political engagement, and attitudes toward out-groups" (p. 166). This suggests that another possible benefit of 'student voice' and 'student agency' helps prepare students for their life outside education.

The collaboration between adult and student is deemed an important aspect in the development of student voice and student agency in schools (Fielding, 2001; Fielding, 2004). While students should take the lead in shaping the pace and subject of their learning, as suggested by Fielding (2004), there is a need to cultivate collaborative relationships not only amongst students, but also between students and teachers to enhance learning. Fielding (2004) suggests that student voice "involves staff and students learning with and from each other and in doing so the traditional roles of teacher and student become less firmly fixed, much more malleable, much more explicitly and joyfully interdependent" (p. 308). In this 'student as researcher' (SAR) model, Fielding's earlier research (2001) discusses levels of student involvement in school self-review and school improvement and that the student's role in its simplest form is as a data source (recipient), moving to active respondent (discussant), to a co-researcher and then finally as an independent researcher (initiator). The rationale behind these four levels begins with the teacher knowing about the student's prior learning and perceptions via surveys and exams. The next step shows the teacher engaging with the student in a group level to enhance teaching and learning, possibly through a student council meeting or peer-led groups. The third level of students as co-researchers shows the teacher engaging the students as partners in learning, possibly through a school-based action research project. Finally, the students themselves engage with teachers and peers in order to deepen their learning. The SAR approach links directly to 'student voice' and 'student agency' identifying that the more the student is involved in planning, discussing and assessing their learning, the greater the increase in student motivation.

It is widely theorised that students' motivation increases when they have more autonomy over what and how they learn (Jagersma & Parsons, 2011; Murphey et al., 2009; Quinn and Owen, 2016; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Giving students an authentic voice and agency allows them to feel they have a worthwhile part to play in their learning environment. This then leads to higher self-respect, self-worth and a stronger knowledge of learning which ultimately leads to a stronger sense of student agency (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Murphey et al. (2009) discuss the positive relationships students will develop with teachers when they are engaged as learners who have some control over their own learning. When students have a voice and agency in their learning, there is evidence of an increase in student self-esteem, self-efficacy and a feeling of more connectedness with their school (Mitra, 2004; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). At the turn of the 21st century, teachers were beginning to listen to

students in a more attentive capacity using formative assessment and goal setting (Fielding, 2001). However, Gonzalez et al. (2017) states that student voice research, while gaining momentum, is typically used from the vantage point of advancing educational research rather than consideration as to how this is impacting educators and students.

Student capability and participation in decision-making

The notion that young people are capable of making decisions that affect their lives (including in education) has become increasingly discussed since the turn of the century (Bolstad, 2011; Bragg, 2007; Gray, 2002). Bragg (2007) notes that "children should be recognised as competent agents, who are participants in, and producers of, rather than passive recipients of, social and cultural change" (p. 15). When students demonstrate a growth of agency, they are able to articulate their opinions and know their views are listened to and acted upon. They become change makers and develop leadership skills, including a sense of responsibility in being able to help others. To ensure that both teacher and student are engaged in the benefits of student agency a shared engagement between teachers and students is essential (Mitra, 2004; Bahou, 2011). Bahou (2011) noted however, that often teachers still had the final say in decisions, which did not allow the students the opportunities to 'act'. This is supported by Jagersma and Parsons (2011), who discuss the 'locus of control' being held by the teacher, and that this must change to ensure the development of true student agency. Gray (2002) discusses this further stating:

> Involving young people does not in itself guarantee that there will always be constructive and positive outcomes, especially when adults take no account of power and accountability issues. Indeed, adults' willingness to engage with young people can often outstrip their ability to do so in an accountable manner (p. 10).

Whilst, institutional norms such as adult authority within a school setting are difficult to change, for student agency to thrive, partnerships between teachers and students must be developed to allow open and free communication. In essence, teachers must be prepared to shift the locus of control to share the ownership of learning with students to engage true student agency.

This shift of control can be linked to student participation and empowerment to speak up and make decisions (Hart, 2002; Shier, 2001). Hart (2002) and Shier (2001) both
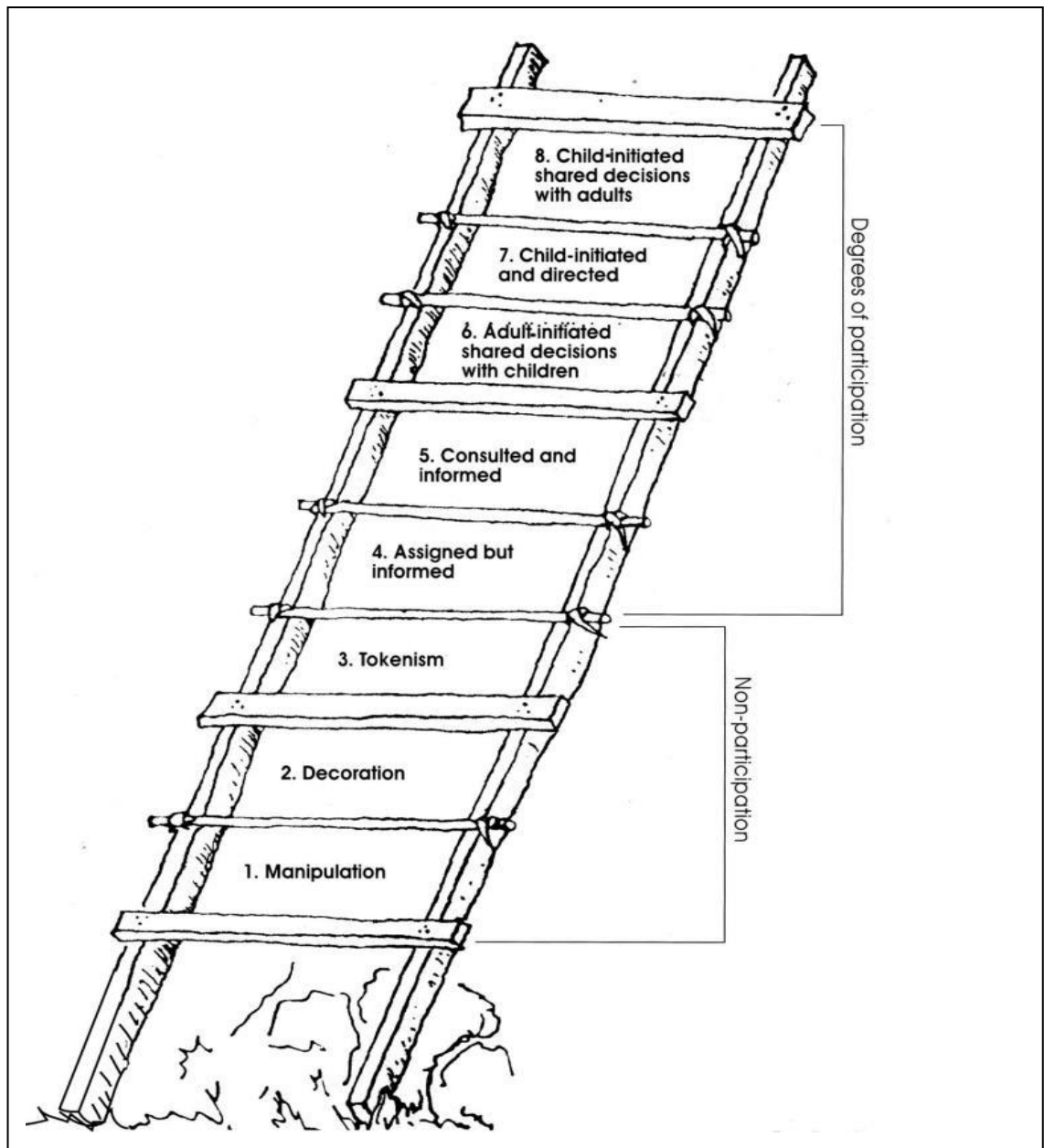
Figure 2.1: The Ladder of Children's Participation (Source: Hart, 2002 p. 41)

presented models to highlight degrees of child participation. Hart's *Ladder of Youth Participation* (Figure 2.1), seen overleaf, highlights different degrees of student participation in projects using the rungs of a ladder. In Hart's ladder, the first three rungs can be seen as a non-participatory area in decision-making where students 'voice' or 'agency' would be deemed tokenistic. As the rungs in the ladder extend, there is more consultation with students but with adult shared or directed decisions. It is not until the last two rungs of the ladder that children are seen as directing and sharing decisions – at this point being agentic. Hart (2002) does warn that the ladder is not designed for children to 'work their way up'. Instead, Hart (2002) suggests that children should choose to work at different levels for different projects, and adults should facilitate the

conditions of where the child may work best to their ability, but avoiding the three lower rungs.

Here is a danger that student voice can be viewed as a process that needs 'to be done' rather than looking into and discussing the 'why'. Some elements discussed in the literature are whether student voice is another 'fad' within education, whether student voice is positively affecting student achievement, and whether students having agentic engagement is preparing them for the future. This matter is described in further detail in the next section.

Challenges and important factors for success of student voice and student agency

The literature highlights that there are challenges and difficulties with embracing student voice and student agency within a school setting. The idea that student voice is another 'fad' (Fielding; 2004) or merely tokenistic is widely discussed (Cook-Sather, 2006; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Mitra et al., 2012; Quinn & Owen, 2016, Robinson & Taylor, 2007). To avoid tokenism, teachers and leaders must be committed to the value of student voice and be prepared to act on student opinions. Cook-Sather (2006) raises a concern that some advocates of student voice work believe that practices may not match rhetoric and the oversimplification of the issues involved in changing school culture may lead to tokenism. Mitra et al. (2012) also discuss that one of the biggest challenges is the engagement of older students as active partners in school change, stating that "The greater the youth role in student voice efforts, the greater the need to empower young people to become strong collaborators for educational change" (p. 109). Teacher authenticity is noted as being an important factor in the success of student voice. Quinn and Owen (2016) discuss this as teachers having a genuine commitment and development of student voice in teaching and learning. There is a misconception that teachers should simply stay out of the way as student voice and agency become more powerful (Mitra et al., 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). In fact, the adult-student interaction is seen to be one of the most important factors in successful student voice initiatives. Challenging as it may be, it is very important that students and teachers mutually engage and participate in teaching and learning through collaborative relationships.

Practical issues of how, when and where student voice is used within a school setting need addressing. Engaging students in having agency in their learning is discussed by Mitra et. al. (2012) as being one of the biggest challenges. Schools and leadership teams need to be aware that a new set of 'how we do things round here' is formed. Teachers need to have genuine 'buy in', and this can take time and energy away from the development of student voice. Part of the concern raised is that a minority of teachers may believe in the mantra 'don't fix what ain't broke', and there is a fear that some teachers may view 'student voice' with anxiety and distrust and another form of criticism or something that they do not do well (Bahou, 2011). This is supported by Bolstad (2011) discussing the power imbalance in higher educational settings, where "adult and youth roles are already tightly framed and the power differentials between adults and young people are deeply embedded" (p. 32).

While there is limited literature concerned with the challenges or successes of student voice and student agency in New Zealand, Cowie et al. (2009) discuss the inclusion of student voice at school level in the implementation of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). Whilst the authors of the New Zealand Curriculum state that schools were committed to ensuring students were contributing to decision making, they acknowledged that this was very challenging. The authors concluded that when curriculum implementation was working well, personalised learning (inquiry based learning) was at the forefront of classroom learning. Smyth (2006) argues that it is not that students do not want to achieve or do not have the ability to, but that a lack of student voice in school can lead to an opposition to learning. In fact, schools can become a more inviting place to be for students when they have a more active role in decision making about their learning. When students are involved in decision-making about what matters in their learning there is an increase in student attachment to the school, an improved understanding of how and why they learn, raised achievement, more empowerment and the ability to take the learnt skills to enrich their wider community. (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra et al., 2012; Smyth, 2006).

Conclusion

The literature in this chapter supports that 'student voice' and 'student agency' may be effective in raising student engagement and motivation. Effective teacher understanding and pedagogy of student voice and student agency is paramount to its success in the

classroom and wider education settings. One area of note is the distinct lack of current New Zealand literature on this subject, which has limited this study to predominantly overseas research.

Chapter Three – Methodology and methods

Introduction

Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach to this research, justifying the positioning of my research within an interpretative paradigm and the use of a qualitative case study approach exploring the perceptions of adults and students with regard to student agency and voice. The methods of data collection – interviews and focus groups – are also discussed. This chapter concludes by discussing the issues of validity, informed consent and ethical issues that were considered.

Research positioning

Epistemology and ontology

An epistemological position informs the research design and seeks to answer questions about the relationship between the knower and the known; how we know what we know; and what counts as knowledge (Scotland, 2012; Tuli, 2011). Scotland (2012) states that "Epistemological assumptions are concerned with how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated, in other words what it means to know" (p. 9). One of the assumptions that can underpin an epistemological position is that knowledge is gained through personal experience. This is known as using an interpretivist epistemological approach. This approach informed the research design and methods I used, as I believe that knowledge is created by the participants' personal experiences, based on the teachers', leaders' and students' perceptions of student voice and student agency.

Ontology is the nature of reality, how people make meaning of their world (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011: Lewis & Somekh, 2011). The underlying ontological assumption is that reality is both multiple and relative with the knowledge gained socially rather than objectively constructed. Human interaction is used instead of a more rigid structural framework. This research adopts a relativist ontological position, where the view is that there are no absolute truths (Bryman, 2008). For this study, the participants described their perceptions about student agency and student voice.

Interpretive Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm underpins my research approach in using a case study for this research (O'Toole & Beckett, 2011). The interpretive paradigm demands an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of interest in order to gather data about what people do, what kinds of problems they encounter and how they deal with those problems. Within the interpretive paradigm, theory follows research, rather than preceding it (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011), and emerges from particular situations. Therefore, in order to understand how my research participants interpret the world around them, I interviewed the adults and children to critically examine the participants' perceptions about student voice and student agency. I have chosen a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm for this research, which takes the form of a case study. In qualitative analysis there is no single truth; people can and do have different points of view and truths – and a good researcher will expose these. Unlike a quantitative study, qualitative researchers do not start with a hypothesis (Morrell & Carroll, 2010); however, the end result of the research provides the answers to the how, why and the what.

A case study is an in-depth study that searches for meaning and understanding with the researcher collecting data and analysing it into a richly descriptive product (Merriam, 2014). I chose a case study approach to allow an in-depth investigation into teachers' and students' perceptions about student voice and student agency. O'Toole and Beckett (2011) discuss that a case study identifies a phenomenon, and then observes and documents a 'typical' or 'exemplary' instance of it, meaning the researcher must ensure that the boundaries of the case study are well articulated. Hartas (2010) discusses the importance of locating "the attitudes and practices within a more grounded context as a way of providing a deeper understanding of origins, causes and motives" (p. 160). The reasons for choosing a case study should include: asking and answering the 'how' and 'why' questions and the researcher being unable to manipulate the behaviours of participants. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) state that case studies are useful for "learning more about a little known or poorly understood situation" (p. 54), which fits in well with the lack of local literature about 'student voice' and 'student agency'. As discussed in Newby (2010), a case study is able to generate rich information as it allows the researcher to explore and understand issues through the eyes of the participants. All this literature led me to the realisation that a case study was the best way to go about this research, primarily as the aims were to understand the participants' perceptions.

Allowing the researcher to ask open-ended questions to allow the participants to elaborate their answers and gain rich information was an important aspect of this case study.

Research methods

This section details the methods of collecting and analysing the data from the semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussions. Selection of participants, data collection procedures, the steps involved and the use of semi-structured interviews are described in this section.

Selection of participants

Purposeful sampling was used for this study to ensure the information provided by the participants is rich and answers the main aims of the research. Purposive sampling is said to be most effective when the participants are linked to a specific cultural domain and are knowledgeable experts within that domain (Emmel, Seaman & Kenney, 2013; Lewin & Somekh, 2011). I chose two schools to contact in anticipation of one agreeing to participate in the research. Emails (Appendix A) were sent to the principals of these two schools, with one principal accepting the offer to be a part of this research. Following this acceptance, I emailed the Teacher Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B) and the Leader Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) to the principal. The principal forwarded the Teacher Participation Sheet to all teaching staff asking them to email me if they were willing to be part of the research. While I had asked to attend a staff meeting to talk to the teachers directly, no time could be offered to me as staff meetings were already timetabled with external professional development. Following the principal emailing out teacher information sheets, two teachers emailed to say that they were willing to take part in this research so a random selection process did not need to occur.

The other two adult participants were the principal of the school and the senior leader responsible for curriculum (as the only other senior leader in the school). All children from these two teachers' classrooms (64 in total) were given Participant Information Sheets (Appendix D) and Consent Forms (Appendix E) for their parents asking for consent for their child to participate in the research. From these 64 children, 20 returned their parent/guardian Consent Form and then six children from each class were chosen at random to participate in each focus group. The children who were not selected by

random selection were given a note in a sealed envelope to take home to their parents thanking them for their offer, but informing them, they had not been selected to take part.

Data collection procedures

Method 1: Semi-structured interviews

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to ensure there is sufficient coverage of the questions in order to obtain a variety of responses, and also the flexibility to prompt participants for further information if necessary (Hartas, 2010; O'Toole & Beckett, 2011; Mutch 2005). Semi-structured interviews include a balance of pre-determined questions and questions that can arise during the interview (Mutch, 2005). I chose this type of interview as it allowed me to ask both open and closed questions and allowed the participants to talk about what was significant to them in their own words. Hartas (2010) discusses that there may be good coverage of the researcher's agenda with the asking and answering of closed questions, but that open ended questions allow the participants to discuss further important issues. This was evident in the way the participants were able to clarify their answers and give specific examples to answer the questions.

There are many advantages and disadvantages of conducting semi-structured interviews (Hartas, 2010). However, I believed that the flexibility of using semi-structured interviews outweighed the disadvantages. Hartas (2010) discusses a number of advantages including the flexibility that allows the interviewer to clarify and probe answers that facilitate a richer discussion, a greater rapport and trust being developed between interviewer and participants, and the idea that "open-ended questions can produce valuable 'answers' to questions the researcher may not have thought to ask or include in a 'structured' interview schedule" (p. 230). I prepared ten interview questions related to the themes in the literature I had read. Each interview was held in a comfortable, private room of the participant's choosing. Prior to the interview starting, the participants signed the Consent Form (Appendix F) and I gained permission from each participant to record the interviews. The questions for the two leaders and the two teachers differed slightly (Appendices G and H) with the interviews being recorded on my iPhone. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by an independent transcriber (Appendix I) and then coded.

Method 2: Focus groups

Focus groups allow participants to express their views on a set topic allowing the researcher to gather information in a collective way, rather than gathering individual viewpoints (Cohen, et. al., 2007; Hartas, 2010). I chose the focus group method to gather data from the students for this study, as I believed that the students' synergy and interaction would bring about more valuable information than a more structured interview process. Hartas (2010) explains that the role of the researcher in a focus group is to play a less prominent role, allowing the participants to engage with the topic. Liamputtong (2011) states that the aim of a focus group is not to reach a consensus but to gain insight through discussion of the attitudes, behaviours, opinions and perceptions of the participants and "discussions are more akin to the natural social interactions among participants" (p. 4). I looked at the possible advantages and disadvantages of focus groups. Hartas (2010) discusses many of these:

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Saving time for the researcher • Participant to participant dynamic • Participants can be stimulated into deeper thinking	• Possible greater threats to validity and credibility of data due to responses being influenced by other group members • Can be difficult for researcher to manage • Challenges associated with transcribing data

Table 3.1: Advantages and disadvantages of focus group interviews (Hartas, 2010)

My years of experience as a teacher was used to mitigate against these possible disadvantages. I ensured that the students had equal opportunities to express their opinion and asked more open ended questions throughout the focus group discussion to engage those students who were quieter during the focus group. The disadvantage of validity and credibility of data due to influence of other group members was, I believe, outweighed by the advantage of participants being stimulated into deeper thinking.

In this research, my awareness of the possible disadvantages prior to beginning the focus group sessions alleviated the problems occurring. I ensured that when all members of

the focus group agreed or disagreed with a certain answer, I would ask each child for clarification, using their student number. This helped with ensuring that each child had a say and that the transcriber could easily decipher who was speaking. My experience as an educator for over 20 years helped me manage the group dynamics. I realised that there was the likelihood of a power imbalance between the children and myself so introduced myself by my first name and reiterated to them that I was there just to listen to what they talked about and that there were no wrong answers. I also discussed with them prior to the interview that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to.

The two focus groups consisted of six children from each teacher participant's class. I chose to meet with two focus groups to give me a rich set of data from the children. Cohen et al. (2011) argue that using only one focus group might provide a less reliable set of information, as the researcher will be unable to establish whether the outcomes are exclusive to the behaviour of the group. Although parents had signed a Consent Form for their child, I also asked each child to sign an Assent Form (Appendix J) at their first meeting with me to indicate that they were happy to take part in the research. This gave children the opportunity to ask questions about the interview process and to be able to withdraw from the focus group should they so wish. The focus groups were held in comfortable settings; in a private room away from the main school and office building, previously used by all of the children for withdrawal groups out of class. I used ten semi-structured questions (Appendix K) to guide the discussion and recorded it ready for transcription.

Analysis of data

To ensure that each interview was coded accurately, I ensured I used all the information I gathered during each interview: direct answers to questions, notes on further discussions and recordings. Vogt, Vogt, Gardner and Haeffle (2014) suggest that the researcher be guided by their research question, but not to be so constrained that the researcher be unprepared to investigate, record and then code something new. I analysed the data through a thematic approach by identifying and then coding relevant concepts thus capturing emerging themes from the data (King & Horrocks, 2010). To code the data I used a table in a word document. Against each participants' questions, I wrote the main ideas that developed from each question during the interview. I then identified open codes that related to the participants answer. From these open codes, I identified

axial codes that then allowed me to narrow down emerging themes. I then formed a statement for each theme and colour coded these on the word document. The photos overleaf are representative of this process (Figure 3.1).

In order to investigate this aim, I endeavoured to answer the following questions:

- How do teachers and principals define 'student agency' and 'student voice' and what mechanisms/practices do they identify as important?
- How do students define and describe 'student agency' and 'student voice' and what impact do they believe this has on their learning?

'Student agency' can be defined as students having the power to be active in decision making about curriculum design, school policies and procedures.

student agency is vitally important in the learning process

students know not only to act but knowing they can act

move from being passive learners to taking more of a role in 'voicing' their opinions and being more actively involved in decision making in regard to curriculum and learning experiences, they can demonstrate greater student agency.

Students' having more agency in their learning will serve as a catalyst of change to shape the teaching and learning within schools, becoming more 'what we want to learn' rather than 'what we have to learn'

Question	Participants answer	Open Code	Axial Code
What do you understand about the term student agency and student voice.	giving children more say in their learning	• Agency • Voice • Say in their learning	• Decision making
Describe what student agency looks like and sounds like in your school	its shared conversations it is not teacher led, its students speaking more of the time where the child's voice is respected	• Agency • Shared conversations • Voice is respected	• Acting • Demonstrating agency
So how well do your teachers understand the notion of student agency and student voice and how do you know this	probably only be a few teachers doing it but this year particularly with the maths the DMIC that we've been doing and because they've had	• Understanding • Few teachers • Noticing a difference • Children more able to voice their opinion	• Decision making • Demonstrating agency • Voicing opinions
What are some successes and challenges you've experienced	probably initially a challenge for a lot of people. getting your head around the idea that you would have these groups and children would be talking and would be sharing and you wouldn't give the answers it all sounds very airy fairy. I was a little bit anxious about turning it over and seeing the maths going down.	• Successes • Challenges • Initially a challenge • Children talking and sharing • Anxious about data going down •	• learning process • Demonstrating agency • catalyst of change
So what professional development have staff had or do new staff receive around student agency.	Well they've had the DMIC and also had Kay Penniel come in for inquiry and she has also been encouraging that getting the students to share more less teacher voice and more students	• PD • DMIC • Kay • Encouraging students to voice more • Teachers voice less	• learning process • Acting
new staff members coming in for next year	probably give them a couple of days or something with them so that it continues because it would be such a shame for it not to.		• learning process
Does student agency feature in your strategic plan	Not as in student agency no. I would have to go back and have a look and see whether we put student voice in when we were talking about doing the maths I would have to have a look at that and if not I will put it in there.	• Strategic Plan • Not student agency • Put back in there	• catalyst of change • Acting •
	lots of observations by outside people as well as us going in they have got a much better understanding of it now and so they are working on it about knowing about it and trying to work on it you will notice the difference if you go into their room there is a lot more teacher speak still the children they are able to voice their opinion a lot stronger than what they used to be able to and share their thinking		
what opportunities does your school give students have agency in their learning	but particularly when we look at the planning now students get an opportunity to have input there and also even through all our reviews now this student voice how we welcome all cultures into the school and how they get to share the students were also interviewed on that. usually the student councillor, you know, student council and it is actually used it is not just tokenism.	• Opportunities • Planning • Reviews • Interviews • Not tokenism	• Demonstrating agency • Voicing opinions • learning process
So are there further opportunities outside the classroom where students have agency around school as in procedures or policies or any other ways.	not the actual policies no maybe that is something we could look at I'm not sure about that procedures and policies that area no not really	• Policies and Procedures • Not really • Need to be looked at	• catalyst of change •

Figure 3.1 Manual coding process

Validity and trustworthiness

Validity refers to the meaningfulness and value of the study, whether the research design enabled the appropriate data to be gathered, and whether the researcher's questions could be answered (Hartas, 2010; O'Toole & Beckett, 2011). Hartas (2010) argues that validity is more important than achieving reliability as the results of a study could be reliable but invalid making the research findings worthless. To ensure the validity of my research findings I developed strategies around the selection of the school and participants to minimise researcher bias in my investigation of the topic. For example, I made the decision not to include the school I was employed at in the list of possible schools for my research. I also trialled the interview and focus group questions with colleagues and students from my school to ensure they were easily understood and clear. This trial showed that the questions for both adults and children were understood and clear and no changes were made to the original questions. As there was an inevitable adult-child power imbalance in the focus group sessions, I used my education experience to keep the discussion going by keeping the children on track and asking questions that the trial group of students were able to answer.

I also considered and addressed the concept of trustworthiness. The notion of trustworthiness is that the data gathered is believable so that the findings are worth paying attention to by the readers (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, 2006; Hartas, 2010). Bryman (2012) defines trustworthiness as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability allowing both the researcher and the reader to assess the quality of the research.

To address credibility of this research, I sent the completed transcripts to the adult participants to approve. Tracy (2010) discusses that transferability occurs when the reader feels they can transfer the findings of the research into their own setting and provoke an emotional experience (evocative story telling). In this respect, the aim of my research was to evoke that feeling so readers could make their own judgements about the findings and to use these findings in their own school setting. Dependability was achieved by recording the interviews, coding the data from the interviews related to the themes highlighted in chapter one and having an independent transcriber. Not allowing personal beliefs or ideas to infiltrate the research findings is the basis of confirmability.

Ethical considerations

Ethical standards are designed to ensure researchers are aware of any conflicts involving moral principles (Caruth, 2015). Hartas (2010) talks of ethics enhancing research. Ethical issues are based on the need to protect both humans and/or animals in the area of informed consent, right to privacy and protection from harm also minimising deception and cultural sensitivity. Most especially, ethical considerations are designed to protect the more vulnerable members of the society including children, people with disabilities, prisoners and those living in poverty (Jenkins, 2005).

Informed and voluntary consent

Informed consent relates to issues of clarity, purpose, trust, honesty and integrity (Hartas, 2010). To ensure that participants were informed about all aspects of the research, they were provided with written Participant Information Sheets (Appendices B, C and D) prior to their interviews. The adults' (including the parents of the child participants) Participant Information Sheets explained the purpose and process of the research, any discomforts or risks and how these would be dealt with if they arose, how their privacy would be protected and their right to withdraw from the research. Signed Consent Forms (Appendix E) were given to me at the interviews for the adult participants and in sealed envelopes from the parents of the 12 children who were selected for the focus groups. The child participants were asked to sign an Assent Form (Appendix J) as their part in agreeing to take part in the research. They were also reminded that they did not have to answer any question that they did not want to and could withdraw from the interview at any time.

Privacy and confidentiality

Protecting the participants' right to privacy and confidentiality was of utmost importance in order to prevent them or the school involved being identified in this dissertation. I limited the likelihood of this happening by ensuring confidentiality to participants and the school using pseudonyms for all participants and the school's name (Hartas, 2010). All other information provided by participants was also treated confidentially including recordings of the interviews being password protected and signed consent forms for the child participants dropped off in a sealed envelope into a sealed box located in the main office.

Minimisation of harm or risk

The principle of minimisation of harm or non-maleficence to the participants is an important ethical consideration. Researchers are obliged to consider whether their research could harm or embarrass the participants in any way. The AUTEC guidelines and procedures (https://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics) state that risks may be physical or psychological and could include (but not limited to) embarrassment, stress and exploitation. The role of the parent of the child participant is of critical importance to help minimise harm (Graham et. al; 2015). As there could be reprisal or retribution from parents for either inclusion or exclusion in the focus group, I made it clear in the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix D) that children were chosen randomly and at any time prior to the day of the interview that parent or child could withdraw from the focus group session. I alleviated participant stress relating to confidentiality by reiterating at the beginning of each interview that the information they were giving to me was confidential, and that at any time they did not have to answer the question asked.

Ethical considerations with child participants

Children's involvement in research has moved on from a time where children were seen as needing safeguarding (although still an important factor) to now having a more participatory focus (Graham, Powell & Taylor, 2015; Jenkin, 2005). Jenkin (2005) talks of child agency being recognised and the fact that they are acknowledged as participants who are competent and have a right to participate in research. As the children were all under the age of 16 I required their parent/guardian to give consent for their child to be involved in this research.

However, I also asked each child to give written assent that they knew what the research was about and were willing to take part. The underlying philosophy of the Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC https://childethics.com/) project seeks to ensure that the dignity of the child is honoured as well as their right being respected and is based on three foundational pillars: reflexivity, rights and relationships (Graham et al, 2015). Reflexivity refers to the how capable people are to knowingly give an account of their actions. Graham et al (2015) discusses 'rights' as the care and protection given to a child as a minor and the fundamental human rights that all children are entitled to. 'Relationships' refers to the connection between the researcher and the multiple participants (some of whom may not be directly involved) involved in the research. In line with this, I ensured I was aware of any potential harm (physical, emotional or social) or benefit to the child participants. I prepared and then trialled the questions on a group

of children of the same age and made slight changes to the way in which the questions were asked, to ensure the children in the focus group better understood them.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the methodology as a small-scale qualitative case study informed by the perceptions of leaders, teachers and students. Semi-structured interviews and focus-group methods of data collections have been discussed. The chapter concluded by discussing the ethical considerations for both adult and child participants.

Chapter Four – Presentation of the research findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the semi-structured interviews and focus groups. I carried out four semi-structured interviews that examined the adult participants' perceptions in regard to student agency and student voice, and two focus groups to examine the students' perceptions. The findings from these interviews and focus groups are presented in this chapter.

The school in which this research took place is a co-educational full primary school (Years 0-8) with a decile rating[1] of five in 2017. The school roll in November 2017 (when the interviews were undertaken) was 402. For the purpose of this study and to ensure the confidentiality of the identity of the school, students and staff, the school is identified here as Aotearoa Primary School (APS). The four participants from APS were the Principal, the Deputy Principal and two Year 5/6 teachers. The participants are numbered (as in Table 4.1) in the order they were interviewed.

Table 4.1 Adult participant's demographic information

Participant Number	Role	Years of education experience
One	Teacher	18
Two	Teacher	8
Three	Deputy Principal	20
Four	Principal	27

As Table 4.1 shows, the participants represented a range of ethnicities and had varying years of experience within the education system. The two focus groups of students consisted of six students from each of the two teachers' classes. Both groups were made up of three females and three males, all from Year 6.

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[1] School deciles indicate the extent the school draws their students from low socio-economic communities. Deciles are used to target funding, for state and state-integrated schools, to help them overcome any barriers to learning that students from lower socio-economic communities might face. The lower the school's decile, the more funding it receives.

Presentation of Findings

I begin this section with findings from the adult participant interviews and then move on to the findings from the focus group discussions. The semi-structured interviews contained nine questions and the focus groups were asked 10 questions. The purpose of these questions was to gather data in relation to the aims of the research:

1. To identify and critically examine educators' (teachers and leaders) beliefs and practices in regard to student voice and agency; and

2. To identify and critically examine students' beliefs and practices in regard to student voice and agency.

The next section in this chapter will present the findings from the four interviews and the two focus-group discussions. Firstly, the findings from the two teachers are presented, followed by findings from the two leaders and then the two focus groups information is combined in one section. I chose to separate the teachers' and leaders' findings to highlight the differences in perceptions between teaching and leadership staff.

Findings: Interviews with teacher participants

Question One: What do you understand by the terms 'student agency' and 'student voice'?

This question was used to find out the participants' understandings of the terms 'student agency' and 'student voice'. Participant One described 'student voice' as students being able to articulate their learning, and 'student agency' as students being more involved in making decisions. Participant Two believed that there was not much difference between student agency and student voice, stating that "there is a fine line as to the difference". She defined both terms as allowing the children to have power over their learning and giving the students ownership of what they are learning, as indicated in the following quote:

> *So my understanding of student agency and student voice is allowing the children to have the power of their learning so they are able to explain their thinking either to each other. You are asking questions to guide them along without giving them the answer. You are making them think about what they've said. It is almost like fishing like you are giving them the bait, but they decide which direction they go with it.*

While this question was asked to discover what the participants understood about both terms 'student voice' and 'student agency', what became apparent was that they were often using these terms synonymously, and no clear differentiation was being made. Furthermore, their understanding was not comprehensive and, for the most part, did not align with the definitions appearing in relevant scholarly literature. This is important because the basis of this research was to understand educators' perceptions around the terms 'student voice' and 'student agency', however, their lack of understanding of the literary use of these terms hindered this.

Question Two: Describe what student agency looks like and sounds like in your school. As Question One found, the terms 'student voice' and 'student agency' were used synonymously, therefore, this question and the following findings are largely the same as in the previous question. The concept of allowing children to have 'ownership' or having some control over what and how they learn was a point that was discussed by both participants. However, the meanings that participants ascribed to the word 'ownership' varied. Participant One stated:

> *Obviously, I do take control of some lessons because I am teaching something new or working a way, but I try and give that, you know, control to the students so that they can work on their tasks, making decisions and it's all about ownership.*

Participant Two described 'student agency' as the children having choice in parts of the task that they were given by the teacher, stating:

> *So the children for writing together they do a plan in either twos or threes on their topic that they do key words altogether and then after 10 minutes I let them walk around the classroom and in a different colour they write down any other key words that they have seen from another group.*

Participant One noted that their recent Maths professional development as an example of student voice, where children worked in mixed ability groups (decided by the teacher) and made decisions about how to work out a problem. Participants' perceptions of allowing children to take control of their learning and giving children choice in parts of their learning (such as choosing groups, deciding on topics to write about) was highlighted in both participants' responses:

> *…it is like the teacher stepping away and the students taking control of their learning and you're just like the facilitator the scaffolder and guiding them through that process.*

As in Question One, children having shared conversations either with their peers or with their teacher was a focus. Overall, the participants talked about the teacher being a facilitator with the children taking more ownership of their learning. However, this 'ownership' of learning was often noted as the children being allowed to make a very simple choice, such as what group to work in or what subject to write about, rather than how, what or why they wanted to learn. Overall, this suggests that 'student voice' and 'student agency' are things that teachers believe they 'have' and perhaps even 'control', but which they can 'give' to the child or 'let' the child have. Again, these perceptions cannot be aligned with those meanings provided in relevant literature.

Question Three: Describe what student voice looks like and sounds like in your school.
Children being 'given' agency was an area inferred by both participants. Participant One stated:

> *Then I say right this group you are going to share your piece of writing with this group and then they are giving each other feedback on what they've done well according to their learning intention which is different for the groups depending on their needs.*

Participant One then described an example of students taking control of their learning as students being grouped by the teacher based on a certain need, and then children feeding back on each other's work:

> *So sometimes the kids are grouped for paragraphing, sometimes they are grouped for language features et cetera and then those children see their learning intention and their success criteria so they say I like your simile I like how you have compared it to, I think you need to include more metaphors because that is in your success criteria and I could not find any.*

While the two participants discussed children making more decisions in their learning, indicating that this was an area of importance to them, the decisions were often given to the children as an 'either/or' option, rather than children having an authentic 'free' choice. Participant Two stated:

> *So this term (in inquiry) our theme is challenge so it's more centred around camp and music. So they get to pick an instrument that they want to learn about or play.*

The answers to these first two questions indicated that both participants' understanding of student voice and student agency were similar, but also that a clear understanding of either concept was limited.

Question Four: How well do your students/teachers understand the notion of student agency and student voice? How do you know this?

The main response to this question was that both participants noted this as an area that needed more development. However, they credited their most recent professional development as giving teachers more opportunity to understand student voice (from their perspective). Participant Two stated that one of the barriers to seeing student voice/agency in their school was the notion of 'power sharing':

> *I think the teachers are working on it, but I don't think they really know that student agency that they need to step away from being that authority to getting the kids to actually take that ownership of their learning, you know, that control, you know, the choices that they have. You try and give them that opportunity to take control of their learning.*

Participant One discussed in length about giving the ownership to the children but still maintaining some control over the learning, stating:

> *I think taking ownership of that task and thinking and deciding and inquiring into their learning, yeah instead of spoon feeding them and lots of talk, so lots of talk.*

This question highlighted the fact that teachers have the belief that student voice/agency is something that is 'given' to students by the teacher. 'Voice' appears to be understood as having an opportunity to talk – that is, to carry out the physical act of talking – not as a way to exercise agency or have their ideas heard. Again, the idea of giving opportunities for student talk or voice was noted as being important into children inquiring into their learning.

Question Five: What opportunities does your school give students to have agency in their learning?

Both participants were able to list only a few areas inside the classroom where the student had some 'agency' in their learning, such as choosing what group to work in, or deciding on what topic to write about.

Question Six: Are there further opportunities outside the classroom where students have agency around school procedures / policies?

The answers to this question highlighted the limited opportunities where students have agency around wider school procedures and/or policies. Both participants acknowledged the school council, made up from a representative from each class, as promoting student

input around some school decisions, but were unable to give any other opportunities. Participant Two stated:

> *I don't think so or if there is they are very, very limited to the Year 6 boys and girls who are the head student councillors.*

This response suggests that there are limited opportunities within the wider school environment for students to have agency.

Question Seven: Can you tell me about the successes / challenges you have experienced in the implementation of student agency initiatives in your school?

Recent professional development in Maths and 'Teaching as Inquiry' (Ministry of Education, 2007(b), p. 35) approaches to learning was discussed by Participant Two as a success in implementing student agency within the school. She noted that scaffolding (using a variety of techniques to move students to more independent learning) students' allowed them to have agency as the students then took more risks and asked more questions. One of the challenges noted by Participant One was teachers stepping back from decision making and allowing the children to make more decisions.

> *I don't think they (teachers) really know that with student agency that they need to step away from being that authority to getting the kids to actually take that ownership of their learning, you know, that control, you know, the choices that they have.*

Overall, the teacher participants suggested that professional development was a key to success in 'student agency' and that challenges linked back to teachers' willingness to 'step back' from making all of the decisions.

Question Eight: What professional development have staff had (and do new staff receive) around student agency?

Both participants discussed the most recent professional development in Maths and *Teaching as Inquiry* (Ministry of Education, 2007a) as helping them giving students more 'voice' and 'agency'.

Participant Two

> *...mentors coming in twice a term to say look you are talking too much or you actually need to listen to what the children are saying. ... across a whole variety of curriculum areas which I think has been beneficial. It definitely has.*

However, this professional development seemed to be more consistent with pedagogical change for teachers leading to students having more choice in certain aspects of their learning, rather than students having 'agency'.

Question 9 Is student agency sustainable in the environment you work in, with curriculum pressures?

Both teachers believed that student agency (as they define it) was sustainable in their working environment and that agency could be further developed into other areas of the curriculum.

Participant One:

> *I think so gosh that is something that it is a pedagogy it is something that you do. Like I say, some teachers do need to understand that this is the way it is this is the way it's going or you are doing it and this is student agency, but I think it is definitely (sustainable).*

Participant Two:

> *I think with the new government that has been elected it will be more sustainable because the national standards hopefully are going to be dropped and I think that gives teachers a little bit of weight off their shoulders not just having to focus on reading, writing and maths because they are the only three subject areas that you are reporting on and we know it is the whole holistic child in all the curriculum areas. So you will be able to use student agency in other areas but there is still going to be gaining in those literacy and numeracy skills, but not directly in that subject, if that makes sense.*

Findings: Interviews with school leaders

Question One: What do you understand by the terms 'student agency' and 'student voice'?

Participant Three talked of the sharing of power between the teacher and the children and handing a lot more of the power over to the students, but also talked of allowing the student to lead their learning. She described the concept of 'ako' – a two-way teaching relationship where the teacher learns from the students, grounded in the Ka Hikitia (Ministry of Education, 2009) principle of reciprocity– in terms of student agency. She believed that student agency could be likened to the child taking over the driving seat of leading learning. Student voice, in her opinion, was about the child questioning what is happening in their learning and having a voice in what they are going to learn.

Participant Four stated that there was no difference between the two terms and that student voice (as she saw it) was about students talking more about their learning, less teacher talk being evident and shared conversations between teachers and students, stating:

> *I think in the school if you are walking into classrooms it's shared conversations it is not teacher led, its students speaking more of the time. It seems to be more relaxed, it is a buzzy atmosphere and it is where the child's voice is respected.*

Overall, the terms as described here focus on more student talk and less teacher talk, but also on students having a voice in what they are learning. This data suggests that participants identify student talk as 'student voice'.

Question Two: Describe what student agency looks like and sounds like in your school. Participant Four believed that student agency and student voice were the same thing. Participant Three noted that student agency looked like teachers handing over the power and children making choices in their learning. She believes that students have more 'agency' in the junior part of the school stating:

> *I think the student agency is when you really see the child taking control of what they are doing and really in the driver's seat of leading the learning and really that desire to want to be a better learner really pushing it forward. I suppose the juniors have always been much better at promoting it with the free choice sort of things that go on with the group boxes that sort of thing. I think it is the very beginning and the base of student agency, children getting a choice in what they get to do. And we lose a little bit of that as we go up the school. I don't know whether it is more accountability I'm not sure.*

In summary, these findings suggest that participants perceived student agency to be about power and choices that are given to the children by the teacher.

Question Three: Describe what student voice looks like and sounds like in your school. The main idea that emerged from this question was that student voice 'looked like' children talking more in class as opposed to teacher talk. Participant Four commented:

> *I think in the school if you are walking into classrooms its shared conversations. It is not teacher led, its students speaking more of the time.*

Participant Three said much in the same vein:

> *Teachers not talking so much and the children talking more. The children talking about how they are going to solve this and working together.*

This idea came through strongly in both interviews, suggesting that less teacher talk is valued as a high priority in teaching and learning and perhaps reflects the participants' understanding of the term 'student voice'

Question Four: How well do your teachers understand the notion of student agency and student voice? How do you know this?

Participant Four said the teachers understood the notion of 'student agency/voice' and that a few had been 'doing it' over the last few years. Participant Three believed that the teachers are "getting there":

> *It is really about power sharing and it is about understanding that and I'm thinking probably the teachers are getting there, they are very passionate about the pedagogy that we are doing with the maths (professional development).*

As in previous questions, this discussion highlighted that the participants' understanding of student agency is that it is something that is 'done' rather than students having agency in their learning.

Question Five: What opportunities does your school give students to have agency in their learning?

Participant Four discussed that students had opportunities in most curriculum areas to give feedback and their 'voice' perspective in planning and reviews, saying:

> *...particularly when we look at the planning, now students get an opportunity to have input there and also even through all our reviews now, this student voice is there.*

Participant Three noted that they offer surveys for students to provide feedback, but also that they have more of an opportunity in their rooms to have a 'say':

> *We do survey the families and the children. Some teachers probably get more student voice through their children asking for feedback than others.*

In summary, this discussion highlighted that students do have some opportunity for having their voice heard mainly in the areas of feedback and answering survey questions as part of curriculum reviews.

Question Six: Are there further opportunities outside the classroom where students have agency around school procedures / policies?

The common view that came through from both participants was that this was an area that needed development:

Well if you looked at school procedures in terms of not the actual policies no maybe that is something we could look at. I'm not sure about that. [Participant Four]

I'm not really sure here this is probably an area that needs some developing. We began implementing some things like getting students on the health and safety team to identify health and safety, but as far as school procedures and policies I'm not one hundred percent sure there. [Participant Three]

Question Seven: Can you tell me about the successes / challenges you have experienced in the implementation of student agency initiatives in your school?

Participant Four highlighted one major success as being teacher 'buy-in' and a changed mind-set to students having more voice. Both participants acknowledged raised achievement levels due to professional development in Maths and *Teaching as Inquiry* (Ministry of Education, 2007). Participant Four stated:

Success has definitely come and as the teachers were doing it (student-led group work) more it's like a lightbulb has gone on in the staff and they can see it and I'm happy because I got better national standards results.

Inquiry communities have been a massive success, but they have had heaps of challenges along the way and that has been a complete change of mind set from every single staff member which has been really hard.

Overall, the discussion highlighted that the implementation of the professional development had encouraged teachers to give their students more say in maths lessons and that this was developing in other curriculum areas.

Question Eight: What professional development have staff had (and do new staff receive) around student agency?

Both participants talked about the most recent professional development in maths and inquiry learning and the benefit this had on all teaching staff. Participant One said:

(the) PD that we've had with (external facilitator) has been absolutely phenomenal getting teachers to really get to know their students and encourage student agency.

However, as noted in previous questions, the term 'student agency' here is referring to students making choices in solving maths problems rather than being agentic.

Question Nine: Does student agency feature in your strategic plan and if so, what benefits do you see for your school, your teachers, your students?

Both Senior Leaders commented that student agency does not feature in the school strategic plan, but acknowledged that they believed that it should. They identified that student voice was an area they believed was important in teaching and learning and should therefore feature in their annual goals. Participant Three stated:

It is probably there at a very surface and probably not very deep. This probably makes me more aware of that actually that we push it and push it and push it in the classroom, but we are not really making it part of who we are. I think for if it is to be really authentic we probably do need to get it in there that underpins everything.

While Participant Four agreed:

Not as in student agency no. I would have to go back and have a look and see whether we put student voice in when we were talking about doing the maths I would have to have a look at that and if not I will put it in there. I think you take it as a given, but now that we've actually done it (student voice) properly this year I can see the value of it.

Focus group findings

Question One asked the students what the best thing about coming to the school was. They talked about making friends, learning new things and lunchtimes. All participants agreed that these were the most important things about school.

Question Two: What decisions are you allowed to make in your classroom / about your learning / within the school? How does your teacher help you with those decisions? Do you like making those decisions or would you rather your teacher make the decision for you – why?

All participants talked about the decisions made in their learning and in their classroom – for example, choosing what to write about, choosing what groups to be in and deciding how to work maths problems out in their own way. They commented that their teacher helped them with those decisions by giving them instructions and help and by keeping them on track:

She makes sure we are listening and doing it (the activity) instead of playing.

All the students commented that they liked to make the decisions mentioned above; however, there were times when they wanted the teacher to make the decision or to help them make the decisions:

I would rather make decisions but sometimes I can't.

> *I feel like sometimes the teacher has to make decisions for you because sometimes the students can't. Sometimes it's hard to make good decisions.*
>
> *Ah, she tells us the topic and then we think of a good idea. If it's something like what are you scared of then she will help you write about it about what you are scared about and then she will tell you.*

In summary, the data suggests that the participants enjoyed making some decisions but liked to have the support of the teacher.

Question Three: How do you know what you need to be learning/what your next step in learning is?

The students talked about 'being told' what their next learning step would be and that they have a goal list in some of their books that they would tick off when done, in reference to knowing what they were learning. One participant commented that they knew their next steps when they got their report twice a year:

> *So when we have reports, we have reports at end of each term. We have three main columns for writing, reading and math. And she'll (teacher) normally put our next learning steps or next goals on the side of what we need to like learn next.*

This question highlighted that the students needed to be told or shown a visual reminder via an adult of what their next learning steps were.

Question Four: Do you enjoy having a say in what and how you learn? Does it help your learning? Tell me why?

The students all agreed that they enjoyed having a say in what they learnt and that it did help their learning. One student explained that it was a good learning process to be able to make decisions now as it would help them as they got older:

> *There is not always going to be someone there to help you make a decision.*

As in previous questions, the students highlighted that being able to make decisions was an important aspect of their education.

Question Five: Do all children in your school make these types of decisions? Do you think they should/shouldn't be allowed to do that?

The students all agreed that not all students made decisions in their school. One student believed that not every student should be able to make decisions about what they learn, stating:

> *Some people in our school they get quite silly sometimes and they might, they are most likely to make the wrong decisions at points. They would always be silly or get distracted in some way.*

All students commented or agreed that the 'junior' children (5 and 6 year olds) are more likely to be told what to do but do make some 'minor' decisions such as choosing a book from the library or deciding what to write about. This question highlighted two important areas of the students' perceptions – that 'older' children are more able to make decisions, and that there is a degree of importance of decisions (minor and major).

Question Six asked the student what they knew about the term "student agency". None of the children had heard of this term but one student had an interesting idea:

> *It's a society of students. Like us. Like Men in Black.*

Question Seven explained to both focus groups that 'student agency' was when students made decisions about what and how they learn and participated in other decisions about what happens in and around the school. The children were then asked if they could now explain what student agency looks like and sounds like in your class and in your school. Focus Group One reiterated the fact that they could make some decisions about their learning, choosing groups or to work by themselves or with a group. Focus Group Two thought that if they were able to make decisions about their own learning, students would take advantage and just choose free time and that is why they had teachers. Both groups discussed the Student Council. They described how each class had a councillor who met with the principal once every few weeks and were involved in making decisions on behalf of their peers, such as themes for discos or ideas for fun days.

Question 8: What else can you tell me about learning at school, what helps you learn and what stops you from learning?

The students listed enablers of learning as: exemplars on the walls, the support of teachers and friends in their learning and when they felt learning was fun. The overall barrier highlighted by the students was being distracted by others in class. The students could name areas that helped them, but did not delve deeper into having voice in their learning.

Conclusion

Chapter Four has presented data collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews regarding senior leaders', teachers' and students' perceptions about 'student voice' and 'student agency'. Three main themes are evident from these findings:

1. the perception that the terms 'student voice' and 'student agency' are one and the same and that the meanings and scope of these terms are unclear in the eyes of both adults and students;

2. adults and students perceive that more student input (understood as: talk, voice, feedback) is beneficial to student learning; and

3. the power imbalance between adult (albeit unrealised by the adult) and student is a barrier to student voice/agency in schools and adults perceive 'student voice' and 'student agency' as something that is 'given' to children.

These findings will be linked to the literature review in Chapter Two and discussed in depth in the following chapter.

Chapter Five - Discussion of research findings

Introduction

This chapter discusses and critically analyses the findings in Chapter Four, making reference to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The three main findings identified in the previous chapter form the basis for this discussion:

1. the meaning and scope of the terms 'student voice' and 'student agency' are not well understood by teachers and leaders;

2. teachers, leaders and students do want students to have 'more say' in what and how they learn, but this is not 'true' student voice or student agency;

3. there is a power imbalance between adults (albeit, unrealised by the adult) and students.

These findings are very different to what I had imagined I would be discussing when first undertaking this research. For the purpose of this study, the definition of 'student voice' is deemed to be, *students having a say in classroom and wider educational aspects of their school lives that affect them.* 'Student agency' is defined as *students having the freedom to act and speak about decision making in curriculum design, school policies and procedures and having this enacted upon.*

Discussion of findings

Theme One: The meaning and scope of the terms 'student voice' and 'student agency' are unclear in the eyes of educators leading to misuse of the terms.

What became clear from the findings was that the terms 'voice' and 'agency' were misunderstood and misinterpreted by the adult participants in various ways. Overall, the terms were used synonymously and likened to children having choices in certain aspects of their learning (often a choice of two or three given by the teacher), voicing their opinions, working in groups, talking more, but not having agency in their learning. This finding suggests that this lack of understanding might impede the implementation of these two practices in classrooms inhibiting true 'student voice' or 'student agency'. Overall, the adult participants defined 'student voice' as having the opportunity to make some choice in their learning such as giving feedback and more student 'talk' in classes, while 'student agency' was espoused to be students taking more control of what they learnt (an example being deciding what maths group to become a part of).

Whilst the teachers recognised that children were making some decisions in their learning, the findings from the students indicated that this was at a surface level and was usually focussed on the children being able to choose from a set of ideas or choices predetermined by the teacher. For example: the students were able to choose what instrument to make in a music inquiry from a choice of five items. The findings showed that students were included in limited discussion and decision making as part of the school council decisions, but did not contribute any ideas towards school policy or curriculum planning. New Zealand schools are guided by the New Zealand Curriculum that sets the direction for student learning. The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) states that it is important that students be active participants in and have influence over their learning. Students show more engagement and purpose in their learning when they are involved in the planning (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000).

The findings indicated that staff encouraged the students to make some choices, but often from a list of two or three pre-decided options given to them by the teacher. The teachers did not discuss with the children the way in which the students could choose to learn – for example, by themselves, in a group or using a different form to record (such as a device). The literature suggests that passive or tokenistic voice is unlikely to lead to changes in school practices (Biddulph, 2011; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). However, when genuinely sought, students' opinions can lead to changes that may enhance their education (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Robinson and Taylor (2007) discuss that listening to pupils in itself is not sufficient; it is what educators do with that information that is important. Therefore, students should be encouraged to contribute their thoughts and ideas and know that what they say will be of value and considered. The findings of my research showed that students were given some chance to voice their opinions, but this was in a limited way, and there was no indication that this led to changes that influenced teaching and learning. Whilst the research says that the past silencing of children's views in regard to their education is beginning to be put aside allowing a greater emphasis on student voice and collaborative decision making to take place in schools (Quinn and Owen, 2016), the findings have indicated that this is not always the case. Cook-Sather (2006) discusses the unique perspectives young people have on teaching and learning, stating that: "their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education" (p. 259). The findings showed that leaders and teachers understood this concept, indicating their perception that student achievement had been raised when students were able to make

more choice in their learning. However, this was in a limited capacity such as choosing which maths group to be in or what to write about. The leaders indicated that there was no student voice in school policy or procedure.

Theme Two: teachers, leaders and students do want students to have 'more say' in what and how they learn, but this is not 'true' student voice or student agency

A factor identified by all four adult participants (acknowledging *their* definition of student voice and student agency) was that the students being more involved in their learning was an important factor in student learning. This was supported from the findings of both focus groups, with students identifying that when they did have the opportunity to make choice in or about their learning, they enjoyed their learning more. The adult participants were able to identify that students who were able to articulate their learning, be involved in what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it, took more ownership of their learning increasing engagement and motivation. Whilst the discussion in the previous theme outlined that teachers do not identify these two terms as theorists define them, the adult participants discussed that the concept of children being more involved in decision making and the development of their learning was an important part of learning. Bolstad (2011) and Ranson (2000) discuss the increased empowerment that students gain when they have agency over their learning.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the terms as described by the adult participants focus on more student talk and less teacher talk, and on students making some decisions in what they are learning. Hamilton (2006) states, "The key reason for listening to student voice is to improve student learning, by allowing the students to articulate their thoughts – so that teachers are able to co-plan learning experiences that suit their students' needs." (p 128). When students have the opportunity to co-plan their learning with their teachers they are more motivated to learn and have a higher rate of success (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Mitra, 2004). However, the findings indicated that while the teachers espoused that they gave children more opportunities to have a 'voice', this did not link to any type of co-planning their learning experiences. The findings from the focus groups clearly showed that the students enjoyed being able to have some decisions in their learning. Whilst the students enjoyed what little opportunities they had to exercise their voice, this likely indicates a huge potential that is being mostly missed by their teachers. The students spoke animatedly about having choices in their learning. Giving students more opportunity to have a say that makes a difference to how adults

act in decision-making and to express their views on educational ideas is widely discussed as increasing student motivation in learning (Biddulph, 2011; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). The responses from both adult and child participants in the findings indicated that the additional opportunities that students had to make decisions in their learning was an important area, albeit perceived as being limited in their school. While teachers espoused that this was an important part of learning, the data suggest that there were limited decision-making opportunities afforded to the students. Jagersma and Parsons (2011) discusses that the voice of the student has largely been silenced when it comes to learning and wider school issues. Considering that students are the major stakeholders in the curriculum, and that it is constructed for the education of students, it is of concern that students are not included in the planning process.

Whilst Jagersma and Parsons (2011) suggests that the achievement of students who do not feel engaged in learning and wider school issues will suffer, there are noted areas of concern with students having more say in their learning. Students' limited academic knowledge of teaching and the curriculum is one area that can cause difficulties in obtaining pupils' views and ideas for their curriculum (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Whilst pupils may be able to comment directly on incidental parts of a school curriculum, they have no basis for comparing what they know with any earlier version of the curriculum. Rudduck and Flutter (2000) argue that "for the most part pupils have little overall sense of how differently learning might be structured and handled and what different values alternative approaches might represent" (p 75). However, the more often students are engaged in decision-making in their learning and understanding of the concept of the curriculum, this area of concern should diminish. The findings showed that students were able to give some feedback about the school curriculum via surveys and school curriculum reviews; however, there was no information about whether their views influenced any changes. Biddulph (2011) suggests that there are a number of environmental cultural and social constraints that can place limitations on the degree to which student agency is developed in schools. The findings indicate that the main cultural limitation of this school may well directly relate to the adult participants' misunderstandings of student voice and student agency. However, their discussion highlights their understanding of the importance of student engagement being enhanced through students having more decision-making ability in their learning.

Theme three: Impact of power imbalance

The findings suggest that there was a power imbalance between teacher and student – albeit one that seemed not to be recognised by the adults or the students. The participants talked often of 'giving' students agency or 'allowing' them to make choice. These two terms highlight the knowledge gap that the teachers and leaders have concerning students being agentic learners. While the adult participants espoused that students were making decisions and they believed that this was an important aspect of the students' learning, there was indication of a power imbalance limiting this. Bishop and Glynn (1999) address the issues of power imbalance in the area of education, believing that teachers retain power over several issues, including, "initiation, benefits, representation, legitimation and accountability mainly by creating a teaching context of their own design" (p. 136). Cook-Sather (2006) discusses the natural imbalance that occurs between children and adults and that they do not meet as equals, quantifying this with the fact that educators must work on this imbalance to support a repositioning of children. Caution is advised here however, as this is recognised as a work in progress rather than something that should be rushed into. Cook-Sather (2006) acknowledges that while students should enter into being participants in educational research and reform, there is an ongoing struggle to find the cultural shifts warranted to support this repositioning of students.

Children are often thought of as 'adults-in-waiting' who cannot or should not make decisions that affect their education (Cook-Sather, 2006; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Wyness, 2010). Wyness (2010) states that children are often thought of as not fully competent yet, nor able to deal with requirements of modern societies. Instead, they are viewed as citizens-in-becoming. The students' data highlighted that while they enjoyed having opportunities to make decisions, they themselves believed that there were times when children should not or could not make decisions about learning, especially when very young (ages 5 and 6). Flutter and Rudduck's (2004) research suggested that pupils of all ages showed a remarkable capacity to discuss their learning, albeit not in formal educational language and that children are able to express their views about their education, and have the understanding required to know what and how they want to learn. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC, 1989) states that every child who is capable of forming their views has a right to freely express these views in all matters affecting their lives (Article 12). As previously discussed in Chapter One, students' views are not included in the revised version of the document the *New*

Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). The findings indicated that student participation in curriculum planning was very limited.

The teacher participants spoke of children making choices and, within a group, working out a problem and deciding on learning intentions and criteria for success. This in itself limits the child to a very narrow set of choices rather than them being agentic learners and making decisions about school policies and/or procedures. Smith (2007) supports this notion, arguing that when adults exclude children from participating in developing educational policy, they are in effect exploiting and neglecting their overall concerns. However, Smith (2007) does argue that adults are still very important in this process and that the child's agency must be balanced by their dependency, allowing adults to support the child when necessary.

When students speak out on their own behalf, and when what they say matters – indeed, shapes action – student voice facilitates and enables teachers and students in the art of teaching and learning. Rudduck and Fielding (2006) argue that young people, knowing that they do have a lot to contribute to their learning, often remain silent as they are unsure how to do this and both teachers and students can feel anxious about students having a say. However, Cook-Sather (2006) discusses the need for a major cultural shift of altering dominant power imbalances between adults and children and that children would fare better in education settings if they were accepted in the same terms as adults. Rather than keeping students in the role of mere recipients of teachers' (and school leaders') decision-making processes, children should be given the opportunity to 'talk', to be heard and their thoughts actioned. The focus group discussion highlighted that whilst they were given opportunity to 'talk', it did not indicate that they were involved in decision-making processes about their learning or next steps in learning. This is supported in Shier's (2001) 'Pathway to Participation' model (as seen in Figure 5.1 overleaf) at Level Four, indicating that educators must be 'ready' to allow children to be a part of the decision making process. Hart (1992) and Shier (2001) both caution that student participation must be genuine and not tokenistic.

Another area highlighted in the findings is whether teachers and educators actually want to 'hand over' the power of decision-making to the students and the readiness for this to happen. Robinson and Taylor (2007) argue that not all educators would be in favour of giving students increasing opportunities to have 'voice' or engagement in the decision

making process, and believe that support must be provided to adults in 'giving up' some control and 'handing' this to children.

Levels of Participation

⇓

5. Children share power and responsibilities for decision making.

4. Children are involved in decision-making processes?

3. Children's views are taken into account.

2. Children are supported in expressing their views.

1. Children are listened to.

START HERE

Openings>Opportunities>Obligations

Are you ready to share some of your adult power with children?

Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions?

Is it a policy requirement that children and adults share power and responsibility for decisions?

Are you ready to let children join in your decision-making processes?

Is there a procedure that enables children to join in decision-making processes?

Is it a policy requirement that children must be involved in decision-making processes?

This point is the minimum you must achieve if you endorse the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Are you ready to take children's views into account?

Does your decision making process enable you to take children's views into account?

Is it a policy requirement that children's views must be given due weight in decision-making?

Are you ready to support children in expressing their views?

Do you have a range of ideas and activities to help children express their views?

Is it a policy requirement that children must be supported in expressing their views?

Are you ready to listen to children?

Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children?

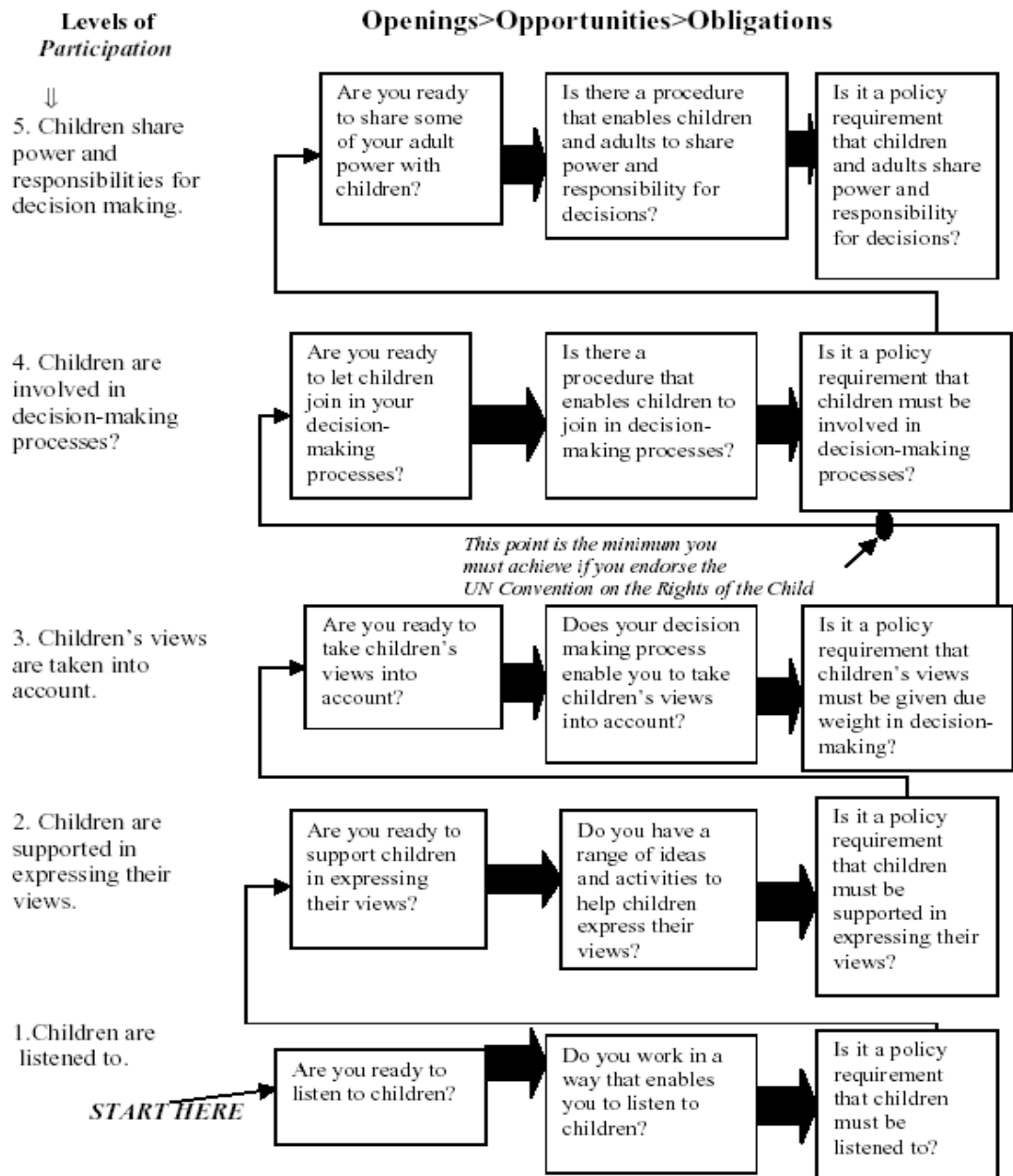Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to?

Figure 5.1: Pathways to Participation (source: Shier, 2001, p. 111)

Flutter and Rudduck (2004) and Jagersma and Parsons (2011) support this notion of readiness, agreeing that the schools must be prepared to embrace these changes and teachers must have the pedagogical knowledge and confidence in student voice initiatives to ensure success. The findings indicated that teachers still held the locus of control, 'allowing' students to have some decision-making over their learning and limited school-wide issues. Jagersma and Parsons (2011) argue that this locus of control

may be due to teachers' lack of confidence in letting go of this power, thus indicating that professional development in the area of the impact of student voice and student agency is required. The findings indicated that both teachers and leaders firmly held this locus of control in most areas of teaching and learning. Their ability to 'let go' of this control and include students in planning learning would be a big step forward in students becoming more agentic.

Conclusion

The discussion of the research findings has provided an overall picture of the key themes generated by the participant's responses. Overall, the lack of 'student voice' and 'student agency' appears to stem from the adult participants' lack of understanding of these terms. These conclusions and recommendations will be highlighted in depth in the following chapter.

Chapter Six – Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

This research has examined teachers', leaders' and students' perceptions of student agency and student voice. I have reached three key conclusions – two have come from the first question and one from the second question – from this study and will discuss these below. I will then outline recommendations.

Key conclusions and recommendations

Key conclusion one: There is a consistent misuse/misunderstanding of the terms 'student voice' and 'student agency'.

The findings from the research identified that there is a wide misuse/misunderstanding of the terms 'student voice' and student agency' by teachers and educational leaders (and subsequently, students as well). Senior leaders and teachers identified student voice as students having more opportunities to talk, to question more and having some choice (albeit limited) in their learning. They espoused 'student agency' as sharing of power, but in reality, the students had very limited decision-making opportunities. The terms 'student voice' and 'student agency' have been around education circles for some years without a clear sector-wide understanding of what they encompass or how they are used in schools. This is not surprising as the literature describes many definitions for both terms. Bolstad (2011) discussed the problematic issue of many different definitions of 'student voice' that were in the literature and how confusing this could be in regard to educator' understanding of the term. The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), while stating that the document's principle function is to set the direction for student learning, does not include any information about 'student voice' or 'student agency'. Until a more widely accepted term is identified and used by all educators, we will be at an impasse about how true 'student voice' and 'student agency' are being implemented in schools and the effect that they have on learning.

Recommendation one:

That the Ministry of Education work to gain a consistent understanding of the terms 'student voice' and 'student agency', so a sector-wide definition can be identified and used correctly and that this is included in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) document.

Key conclusion two: The locus of control and the adult: child power imbalance is limiting opportunities for students to have agency in their learning.

The adult participants in this research study described how they 'allowed' the students to have power over their learning and 'gave' choices to the students. This does not lend itself to students being truly agentic in their learning. However, Bolstad (2011) determines that the embedded power imbalance in schools may be difficult to change based on three areas of concern: scepticism about the capacity of the student to have meaningful input; concern that students will undermine authority if they have more control; and concern that the development of this will take away from learning itself. The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) in fact gives the locus of control to the principal and teachers, stating, "Principals and teachers can show what it is that they want their students to learn and how their curriculum is designed to achieve this." p. 39). It is widely written that students who play a part in decision making about their learning have more motivation and engagement at school (Biddulph, 2011; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Reeve and Tseng, 2011).

Recommendation two:

Educational leaders and teachers should have professional development in 'student voice' and 'student agency'. This professional development would identify how 'locus-of-control' affects 'student agency' and therefore student motivation and engagement.

Key conclusion three: Students have limited opportunities to be agentic in their learning and are not included in co-planning of lessons or curriculum planning.

Like the adult participants, the students did not understand the 'true' meaning of student voice or student agency. They described 'student voice' as making choices, discussing more in groups, talking with the teacher about their learning and were unable to define student agency at all. The findings did indicate, however, that the students identified that when they did have this choice/power over their learning, they enjoyed learning. Motivation and engagement undoubtedly increases when students have more autonomy over what and how they learn (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). The links to student engagement and their input into building the curriculum is of great benefit to student learning (Jagersma and Parsons, 2011).

That students are involved in curriculum planning to ensure their 'voice' is heard and acted upon.

Final word

The purpose of this study was to understand how educators and students perceived 'student voice' and 'student agency' and the impact on teaching and learning. Overall, what became very clear was that these terms are misunderstood and actioned at a very basic level. However, my experience determines that this is not due to incompetence of the teachers or leaders, but to the fact that the theoretical meanings of these terms are misunderstood and not embedded in school wide practice.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A – Email to Principals

Appendix A

Email to Principals

I am currently completing my dissertation through AUT into leaders, teachers and students perceptions around student voice and student agency. I would like permission to come to your school and interview you, a senior leader, two teachers and 2 focus groups of students (preferably Year 5/6 students). If you agree, I am happy to come into a staff meeting to introduce my research or send you through all the information. Let me know your thoughts.

Look forward to hearing from you.

APPENDIX B – Teacher Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

01/04/2016

Project Title

Student agency – a study of primary school-aged children

An Invitation

Kia ora, my name is Brenda Cronin. I am currently enrolled at AUT in the Masters of Educational Leadership programme and am undertaking research to complete my dissertation. I would like to invite you to participate in my research about student agency. My research is focussed on leaders', teachers' and students' perceptions about student voice and student agency. I will present a summary of my findings at an academic conference and as an educational journal article.

What is the purpose of this research?

I am undertaking this research as I believe there is very little New Zealand based research into student voice and student agency and its impact on student learning. I believe in students having voice and agency in their learning and this has fuelled my passion to further research this topic.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Following the flier that was posted on the staffroom wall, you identified to me via email that you would like to participate in this research.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you would like to participate in this research, please contact me using the address brendac54@gmail.com If more than two teachers volunteer, I will select the first two teachers and will advise you if you have not been selected.

What will happen in this research?

I would like to interview you, at a suitable time for you, early in Term 2. The interview should take no longer than an hour and everything discussed will be confidential. I will

record our interview and then that information will be transcribed – after which time the transcript will be made available to you to check that you are happy with the information. You have the right to withdraw from the research up until 10 days after receiving the transcript. I will also undertake a focus group interview with 5-6 students from your class. Parent information forms and consent will go home with all of your students and I will organise a drop box where students can drop these forms off. These students will be picked randomly from those whose parents have consented for them to be a part of the focus group.

What are the discomforts and risks?

There are no anticipated discomforts or risks. The part that you will play in my research is completely confidential.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

If at any time you do feel uncomfortable or feel at risk of being easily identified by giving an answer, please feel free to decline to answer or comment.

What are the benefits?

I believe there will be benefits to many different people as a result of this research. The benefit to the school (principal, teachers and students) will be to highlight student voice and agency and its impact to children on their learning. The benefit to the wider community could be open discussion about student agency and the impact that it could have on teaching and learning. I will benefit from this research as it will help me attain my Masters in Educational Leadership.

How will my privacy be protected?

At no time will you be identified by name or by the school you work in. The questions and comments from the interview will remain confidential to myself and my supervisor.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The only cost to you for this interview will be your time. The interview should take no longer than 45-60 minutes and the time it will take you to read the transcription.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please respond to this invitation within the next 10 working days (07/07/2017).

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

You can request a summary of the findings of my research, which I will email to you once the dissertation is complete.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Alison Smith, asmith@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, Kate O'Connor, *ethics@aut.ac.nz*, 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Brenda Cronin, brendac54@gmail.com, 0274 289687

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Alison Smith, asmith@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 7363

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 13 June 2017, AUTEC Reference number 17/138.

APPENDIX C – Principal/Leader Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

01/04/2016

Project Title

Student agency – a study of primary school-aged children

An Invitation

Kia ora, my name is Brenda Cronin. I am currently enrolled at AUT in the Masters of Educational Leadership programme and am undertaking research to complete my dissertation. I would like to invite you to participate in my research about student agency. My research is focussed on leaders', teachers' and students' perceptions about student voice and student agency. I will present a summary of my findings at an academic conference and as an educational journal article.

What is the purpose of this research?

I am undertaking this research as I believe there is very little New Zealand based research into student voice and student agency and its impact on student learning. I believe in students having voice and agency in their learning and this has fuelled my passion to further research this topic.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

As the Principal / Senior Leader in charge of learning at your school

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you would like to participate in this research, please contact me using the address brendac54@gmail.com If more than two senior leaders volunteer, I will select the first two and will advise you if you have not been selected.

What will happen in this research?

I would like to interview you, at a suitable time for you, early in Term 2. The interview should take no longer than an hour and everything discussed will be confidential. I will record our interview and then that information will be transcribed – after which time the transcript will be made available to you to check that you are happy with the information.

You have the right to withdraw from the research up until 10 days after receiving the transcript. I will also undertake a focus group interview with 5-6 students from two teachers' classes. Parent information forms and consent will go home with the students and I will organise a drop box where students can drop these forms off. These students will be picked randomly from those whose parents have consented for them to be a part of the focus group.

What are the discomforts and risks?

There are no anticipated discomforts or risks. The part that you will play in my research is completely confidential.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

If at any time you do feel uncomfortable or feel at risk of begin easily identified by giving an answer, please feel free to decline to answer or comment.

What are the benefits?

I believe there will be benefits to many different people at the end of this research. The benefit to the school (principal, teachers and students) will be to highlight student voice and agency and its impact to children on their learning. The benefit to the wider community could be open discussion about student agency and the impact that it could have on teaching and learning. I will benefit from this research as it will help me attain my Masters in Educational Leadership.

How will my privacy be protected?

At no time will you be identified by name or by the school you work in. The questions and comments from the interview will remain confidential to myself and my supervisor.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The only cost to you for this interview will be your time. The interview should take no longer than 45-60 minutes and the time it will take you to read the transcription.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please respond to this invitation within the next 10 working days (07/07/2017).

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

You can request a summary of the findings of my research, which I will email to you once the dissertation is complete.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Alison Smith, asmith@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, Kate O'Connor, *ethics@aut.ac.nz*, 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Brenda Cronin, brendac54@gmail.com, 0274 289687

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Alison Smith, asmith@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 7363

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 13 June 2017, AUTEC Reference number 17/138.

APPENDIX D – Parent/Caregiver Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

01/04/2016

Project Title

Student agency – a study of primary school-aged children

An Invitation

Kia ora, my name is Brenda Cronin. I am currently enrolled at AUT in the Masters of Educational Leadership programme and am undertaking research to complete my dissertation. I would like to invite you to participate in my research about student agency. Student agency can be defined as students having the *power and knowledge* to be active in decision making about curriculum implementation, school policies and procedures. Student agency operates where students know not only **to** act, but know that they **can** act. My research is focussed on Leaders', teachers' and students' perceptions about student voice and student agency. I will present a summary of my findings at an academic conference and as an educational journal article.

What is the purpose of this research?

I am undertaking this research as I believe there is very little New Zealand based research into student voice and student agency and its impact on student learning. I believe in students having voice and agency in their learning and this has fuelled my passion to further research this topic.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Your child's teacher has agreed to take part in this research. Therefore, I would like to invite a group of 6 children from your child's class to take part in a group discussion

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you agree that your child can participate in this research, please complete the consent form. If you consent to your child participating in this research and your child is selected (from random selection if more than 6 children have parent consent to participate) your child will be asked to give their assent to participating in this research project.

Participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice). You are able to withdraw your child from the study at any time up to 10 days after the focus group discussion take place and the information that your child provided in the discussion will be removed from the study

What will happen in this research?

I will be talking with the Principal, a senior leader and two teachers from the school along with two groups of students about their perceptions of student voice and student agency. The focus group discussion your child will be a part of will be recorded to allow for an accurate record of our discussions.

What are the discomforts and risks?

Your child's identity will be kept completely confidential. At no time should your child feel uncomfortable with answering a question or making a comment at any point during the group discussion. I will ensure that your child understands then s/he can leave the group discussion at any time if they choose.

What are the benefits?

I believe there will be benefits to many different people at the end of this research. The benefit to the school (principal, teachers and students) will be to highlight student voice and agency and its impact on children's learning. The benefit to the wider community could be open discussion about student agency and the impact that it could have on teaching and learning. I will benefit from this research as it will help me attain my Masters in Educational Leadership.

How will my privacy be protected?

At no time will you or your child be identified by name or by the school name. The questions and comments from the group discussion will remain confidential to myself and my supervisor.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There are no costs apart from the time your child will spend with me during the focus group interview. This interview will take place during the school day and will take no more than 60 minutes to complete. If you consent to your child taking part, they will be out of class for this time, while the other students in the class remain with their teacher.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please respond to this invitation within the next 10 working days (dd/mm/yyyy).

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

You can request a summary of the findings of my research, which I will email to you once the dissertation is complete.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Alison Smith, asmith@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, Kate O'Connor, *ethics@aut.ac.nz*, 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Brenda Cronin, brendac54@gmail.com, 0274 289687

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Alison Smith, asmith@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 7363

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 13 June 2017, AUTEC Reference number 17/138.

APPENDIX E – Parent/Guardian Consent From

Project title: **Student Agency – the case of primary school-aged children**

Project Supervisor: **Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Brenda Cronin**

- ○   I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 01/04/2017
- ○   I have had an opportunity to ask questions
- ○   I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group discussion and that the group discussion will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ○   I understand that my child taking part in this study is voluntary, and that I may withdraw my child from the study at any time without him/her being disadvantaged in any way.
- ○   I agree to my child/children taking part in this research.
- ○   I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes○ No○

Child/children's   name/s :

……………………………………………………………………………

Parent/Guardian's   signature:

....................................……………………………………………………

Parent/Guardian's   name:

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Parent/Guardian's Contact Details (if appropriate):

………………………………………………………………………………..

………………………………………………………………………………..

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee 4 June 2017

AUTEC Reference number 17/138

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

APPENDIX F – Adult Participant Consent Form

Project title: ***Student Agency – the case of primary school-aged children***

Project Supervisor: ***Alison Smith***

Researcher: ***Brenda Cronin***

○   I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 01/04/2017

○   I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

○   I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

○   I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time (up to 10 working days after I receive my interview transcript) without being disadvantaged in any way. I agree to take part in this research.

○   I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes○ No○

Participants signature:..……………………

Participants Name: ....……………………………

Participants Contact Details (if appropriate):

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…………………………………………………………………………………..

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee 4 June 2017

AUTEC Reference number 17/138

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

APPENDIX G – Leader Interview Questions

1. What do you understand by the terms 'student agency' and 'student voice"?

2. Describe what student agency looks like and sounds like in your school.

3. Describe what student voice looks like and sounds like in your school.

4. How well do your teachers understand the notion of student agency and student voice? How do you know this?

5. What opportunities does your school give students to have agency in their learning? Can you give me specific examples?

6. Are there further opportunities outside the classroom where students have agency around school procedures / policies?

7. Can you tell me about the successes / challenges you have experienced in the implementation of student agency initiatives in your school?

8. What professional development have staff had (and do new staff receive) around student agency?

9. Does student agency feature in your strategic plan and if so, what benefits do you see for your school, your teachers, your students?

APPENDIX H – Teacher Interview Questions

1. What do you understand by the terms 'student agency' and 'student voice"?

2. Describe what student agency looks like and sounds like in your class.

3. Describe what student voice looks like and sounds like in your class.

4. How well do your students understand the notion of student agency and student voice? How do you know this?

5. What opportunities does your school give students to have agency in their learning? Can you give me specific examples?

6. Are there further opportunities outside the classroom where students have agency around school procedures / policies?

7. Can you tell me about the successes / challenges you have experienced in the implementation of student agency initiatives in your classsroom?

8. What professional development have you received around student agency?

9. Is student agency sustainable in the environment we are in with curriculum pressures? Why do you feel that way?

APPENDIX I – Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What is the best thing about coming to this school?

2. What decisions are you allowed to make in your classroom / about your learning / within the school? How does your teacher help you with those decisions? Do you like making those decisions or would you rather your teacher make the decision for you – why?

3. How do you know what you need to be learning/what your next step in learning is?

4. Do you enjoy having a say in what and how you learn? Does it help your learning? Tell me why?

5. Do all children in your school make these types of decisions? Do you think they should/shouldn't be allowed to do that?

6. Can you tell me some words that come into your head when you hear the words 'student agency'"?

7. Student agency is when students make decisions about what and how they learn and maybe other decisions about what happens in or around the school. Can you tell me what student agency looks like and sounds like in your class and in your school?

8. What else can you tell me about your learning at school? What helps you learn? What stops you from learning?

APPENDIX J – Child Assent Form

Hello – my name is Brenda and I am working on a big research project finding out more information about student agency. Student agency is about students having a say in what they are learning and how they learn.

I would like to spend time at your school and will come in to talk to you and some other students in what is called a focus group interview. I will ask you all some questions in a group and you can just talk about the answers or give me your ideas.

Your parents/caregivers have given their permission that you can be a part of this focus group. This form is for you to tell me that you would like to join in with the group. You are allowed to say no if you would rather not – that is absolutely fine.

While I am there at the school with you, you can ask me about my work whenever you want to. Sometimes I will use a phone to record what we are saying. If you are not sure or worried, talk to your teacher or your parents about this.

I am finding out information from you about student agency – you might already know a lot about this and how this works in your school. I want to find out a bit more by talking with you and your friends.

Please circle **YES** if you would like to take part in the student focus group interview

Please circle **NO** if you do not want to do this

Please circle **MAYBE** if you are not sure. If you cannot decide that is fine because you can come along anytime and tell me or one of your teachers or your parents that you want to join in.

This is my photo: