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Student Voice to Foster Student Leadership: A Case Study of a Private International School in Dubai – United Arab Emirates

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I, Ghadeer Abu-Shamat, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Completing this thesis marks a significant milestone in my life. As the Headteacher and Senior Vice President of Education in the largest organisation globally overseeing a group of schools while also being a mother to two young girls, achieving this was not a simple task.

I want to highlight that none of this would be possible without the blessings of Allah Almighty. Therefore, I am eternally grateful to Him.

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Abstract

The concept of student voice has gained significant traction in educational research as a way to foster student engagement and empowerment, and school improvement. The literature on student voice acknowledges the importance of student voice and leadership activities; however, there is limited literature on how to implement student voice activities effectively to include all students across a school, and it also lacks guidance on how to measure the effectiveness of these activities and their impact on school improvement. While influential scholars such as Mitra, Fielding, and Rudduck have extensively explored student voice in various educational settings, a relative lack of research has been focused on the particular challenges and opportunities within international school contexts, particularly in the Middle East.

This case study has investigated whether there is evidence that student voice fosters student leadership in a private international school in Dubai, United Arab Emirates; the meaningful practices that the school leaders implement to amplify student voice; and why school leaders should foster and support student voice and student leadership at the school level. Data was collected through student surveys, focus-group discussions, and interviews with the leaders and teachers in the school to understand the school's strategies and answer the research questions.

The main findings confirm that student voice is essential in fostering student leadership. The school has implemented innovative practices, such as holacracy and a council system, to amplify student voice and increase student participation. These moves reflect a high level of collaboration between students and adults, as highlighted by Hart (1992) and Mitra (2006). However, the study also has identified a need for a unified definition of student voice within the school, and that several of the existing practices and platforms lack the agency required to influence decisions at the school level. Since the sample comprises secondary students, further study is required to explore the activities at younger ages in order to explore the practices that amplify student voice at early stages of school.

This thesis proposes a model with different activities to be implemented at various levels: 'classroom strategies' for all the students in the classes and 'school-wide strategies', through use of which students are selected to participate in student-led activities in collaboration with adults at the wider school level. The thesis also proposes a matrix for utilisation by school leaders and teachers to assess the effectiveness of student-voice activities in relation to Hart's Ladder and Mitra's Pyramid.

Keywords and Phrases

student leadership, student voice, student engagement, student participation, youth leadership, student voice activities in schools, leadership activities in schools

Impact Statement

The Doctor of Education (EdD) programme at University College London (UCL) has constituted a transformative and enriching experience that has significantly enhanced my professional understanding and approach to educational leadership. This comprehensive programme, which is characterised by a blend of taught courses, research projects and meticulous self-reflection, has deepened my appreciation of the complexities of educational leadership and the vital role of evidence-based practices in decision-making.

A cornerstone of the programme has been its emphasis on self-reflection, which has proven invaluable in prompting me to evaluate critically my practices, beliefs and assumptions. This introspection has not only illuminated areas for improvement but has also fostered a more nuanced understanding of the intricacies that are inherent in educational leadership. Through this reflective process, I have identified and challenged my preconceptions and thereby created new avenues for growth and development. The constructive feedback and guidance from tutors and peers have been instrumental in compelling me to engage in deeper contemplation and to consider perspectives that I might have previously overlooked. This enhanced understanding has directly influenced my professional practice, as I have actively sought to cultivate these qualities within my school. My encouragement of professional maturity and ethical conduct among staff has become a priority, in order to foster a culture of trust and mutual respect.

The EdD programme has profoundly impacted my professional knowledge and practice as it has emphasised the significance of student involvement in decision-making. Through research and engagement with relevant literature, I have developed a deeper appreciation of the importance of empowering students as partners in educational change. This realisation has prompted me to implement strategies that are aimed at

amplifying student voice and fostering student leadership within my institution. After I have engaged students in decision-making processes, I have observed a marked improvement in their engagement in, motivation for and sense of ownership over their educational experiences. This approach benefits the students, enriches the school environment and cultivates a more dynamic and inclusive community.

The programme has also reinforced the importance of ensuring that decisions are based on evidence. Through research projects, I have refined my capacity to analyse data critically and to apply findings to real-world contexts. This skill has been invaluable in shaping policies and practices that are grounded in empirical evidence, to ensure that the decisions made at my school are effective and impactful. By basing my decisions on robust evidence, I have cultivated a more informed and reflective approach to leadership that prioritises continuous improvement and excellence in education.

The EdD programme at UCL has significantly contributed to my personal and professional development, as it has equipped me with the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence to address effectively the challenges of educational leadership with a more thoughtful and reflective mindset. As I integrate these insights into my work, I remain committed to creating an inclusive and supportive environment for both staff and students, as I am motivated by a collective vision of ongoing enhancement and excellence in education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Researcher's Background

My educational and professional journey has been unique. I hold a Bachelor's degree in science, in which I specialised in chemistry, and I worked as a teacher in Jordan without a degree in education, as this was an acceptable practice at the time. I taught chemistry for the International General Certificate of Secondary Education, Advanced Subsidiary, and Advanced (second-year) levels, as well as the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. After six years of teaching, I was promoted to a principalship, becoming the middle school principal (grades 5-8) for the international stream.

After nine years in this position at the same school, I resigned to pursue further studies and to advance my educational career. Since I did not have a formal education degree, I could not be accepted into the Master's programme in Jordan to obtain a Master's degree in education. Therefore, I travelled to Lebanon to apply for the Diploma programme in educational management and leadership at the American University of Beirut. Simultaneously, I was appointed as the founding principal of a private school in Jordan that followed the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. During this experience, I discovered my passion for student voice and student leadership. I had the opportunity to introduce several initiatives, such as student-led conferences and 'In the Principal's Shoes', which meant that a student led the school for a day while shadowing me as the principal. This solidified my commitment to elevating student agency and empowerment.

These experiences inspired me to pursue a Master's degree at the Institute of Education (IoE)- University College London (UCL). My MA thesis was focused on student leadership. After completing my MA, I applied for the EdD programme. Upon my successful acceptance into the programme at UCL, I began working for GEMS Education

as a headteacher in an international school that follows the American curriculum. GEMS Education, founded as Global Education Management Systems , is one of the largest private school operators in the world and is based in Dubai. GEMS operates 46 schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and has schools in Qatar, the United States of America (USA), India, and the United Kingdom (UK). It has been described as a “multi-curriculum international” school group (Easterbrook, 2022), as it offers a diverse range of curricula, including the National Curriculum for England, the IB programmes, the Indian curriculum, and the American curriculum, thereby catering to the diverse needs of its multinational student population. Collectively, GEMS Education serves over 140,000 students, who represent 170 different nationalities, across its global network of schools. I’ve been working for GEMS for 10 years. I have developed my educational career by holding various positions, in addition to my role as a headteacher, to become Vice President of Education and Senior Vice President of Education, overseeing different schools and other strategic projects in the region.

Personal Interest

In 2012, I attended a workshop about student leadership at which the presenter shared a YouTube link to a keynote speech that an American student presented called Dalton Sherman, who was only ten years old and in grade five (year 6). The student passionately addressed an audience of 20,000 educators from the Dallas Independent School District in the USA by confidently asserting his self-belief and asking the educators: “Do you believe in me?” I was inspired and impressed by his confidence, articulation and strong presentation. I wondered, what makes a ten-year-old boy present an inspiring speech to 20,000 adults? In the eight-minute speech, Dalton acknowledged the vital role of educators in supporting, nurturing and caring for students, even when the students make it difficult. He urged the educators not to give up on the students and to believe in them until those students reached their potential.

He stated confidently that he could accomplish anything, create anything, and become anything, provided that educators and teachers had faith in their students. His words resonated in my mind; Dalton made me realise that all children have talents and can shine in many ways if only they are given the opportunity. This workshop was eye-opening for me as an educator because it was the first time I had heard about 'student voice,' learned about Mitra's Pyramid (2006) and discovered the concept of 'student leadership'. Since then, I have become a passionate advocate of student empowerment in the schools where I work as a leader. I have listened actively to the students, taken actions and decisions based on their feedback, never underestimated their potential, and made them feel that they are important stakeholders. When I was appointed headteacher of the school at which I am currently based, the students played a vital role in its transformation journey from an ineffective to a successful school in terms of students' personal development and outcomes.

The world is changing quickly; technology advances daily, and job opportunities alter in line with those advances. Hence, it is time for educators and policymakers to view students as individuals with ideas and aspirations and as future leaders in different fields. In this era, educators are more challenged than ever. They must understand that children's life skills and character development must be nurtured from an early age. This can be achieved by encouraging them to speak up and share their perspectives, because such sharing empowers them to participate in the decision-making process at the school level.

School leaders have different perspectives when it comes to student voice. Some school leaders believe that the involvement of students in decision-making is essential to improve schools. Other leaders assume that listening to the students is enough to show

them that their voices matter. Researchers (Fielding, 2001a; Hart, 1992; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2006; Rudduck, 2007) highlight that student involvement in school reform is a catalyst for school improvement. Nevertheless, as a practitioner, I have observed that schools rarely involve students in their reform plans. In some schools, this involvement is inconsistent, and in others, the activities that are intended to promote student voice may not genuinely foster student leadership. Moreover, there are different perspectives and a mixed understanding regarding student voice and leadership. For example, students may be involved in discussions about their schools as part of the institutions' marketing campaigns or to assist with administrative tasks (Rudduck, 2007). Schools may include only student council members in the decision-making process. The various practices in different schools indicate that there is a gap between theory and practice that may hinder the positive impact of the student voice and, therefore, the equipping of students with essential leadership skills such as decision-making.

This research builds upon my MA research and Institution Focused Study (IFS) project, in which I focused on student voice and student leadership by conducting studies in various contexts across Jordan and the UAE. This work was carried out in an international private school in the UAE. I collected data and supported it with relevant literature to develop the principled student leader model, which I proposed at the end of my MA dissertation in 2014 and started to implement in the school where I have worked as the headteacher since 2015. The EdD research aims to evaluate the practices of student voice that school leaders implement and their impact, as referenced in the literature.

Education Context in the UAE

The educational system in the UAE demonstrates a dynamic and responsive approach to learning. It emphasises quality, relevance, and innovation as central to preparing

students for the future. It is characterised by a strong commitment to modernisation, quality improvement, and alignment with global standards. Strategic initiatives by the country's leaders, including the National Agenda 2015, lay the foundation for enhancing educational outcomes, and improving performance in international assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and fostering innovation and creativity. The UAE's education system comprises public and private sectors; public education is provided free for UAE nationals and overseen by the Ministry of Education. In Abu Dhabi, the capital, the Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) oversees nurseries and private schools, whereas in Dubai, the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) oversees private schools. The Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) is an entity within the KHDA that is responsible for overseeing quality assurance in private schools through the inspection cycles.

Private schools in Dubai serve a diverse expatriate community and offer 17 different curricula, including the American curriculum, the National Curriculum for England, the Indian curriculum, the Chinese curriculum, the IB, and the UAE Ministry of Education curriculum. Consequently, the UAE's education system has become increasingly globalised due to the rise of international private schools and attractive incentives for teachers. This has led to the recruitment of educators from various countries, including Canada, the UK, Australia, the USA, South Africa, and other Arab countries. In 2017, the Ministry of Education introduced a teacher licensing system to ensure the quality of teaching (Gallagher, 2019; Saadaoui et al., 2024).

The UAE National Agenda, which was launched in 2015, is intended to improve the quality of education in private and public schools across the UAE, integrate technology, and engage the community in education. Building on this foundation, the recently

published Education Strategy 2033 (E33) is designed to elevate education quality (KHDA, 2024). It emphasises the teaching of future-oriented skills, such as critical thinking and digital literacy, and sets specific targets for student performance in international assessments and benchmarks. The government aims through the E33 to place Dubai among the top five cities in the world in terms of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the top ten cities in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)[1] and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)[2]. The strategy promotes vocational education, lifelong learning, and stakeholder engagement, in order to ensure that education aligns with industry needs. Recent reforms have focused on enhancing the curriculum to incorporate inquiry-based learning and critical thinking, in order to foster a culture of innovation. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics education is prioritised to inspire students to pursue careers that use those subjects.

Although significant progress has been made, challenges remain, which include ensuring consistent quality across all schools and addressing the needs of a diverse student population. In TIMSS 2023, the UAE demonstrated exceptional achievement; it was ranked first among Arab nations and surpassed the global average (Ministry of Education, 2024). Students had made significant progress since 2019; for grade-4 students, mathematics scores were up by 17 points and science scores by 22 points, while for grade-8 students, mathematics scores increased by 15 points and those in science by 14 points (Ministry of Education, 2024). This performance reflects the ministry's efforts to enhance skills and boost competitiveness and aligns with the UAE's educational goals (Ministry of Education, 2024). However, the 2023 report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2023a) shows that

[1] TIMSS is used for fourth and eighth graders.
[2] PISA is used for 15-year-old students (regardless of the grade level).

the UAE's average PISA 2022 scores in reading, science, and mathematics fall below the OECD average (OECD, 2023b).

A significant challenge for the UAE is the high rate of teacher turnover. It is difficult to obtain recent official data on public-sector turnover in the UAE (Saadaoui et al., 2024). Nevertheless, teacher turnover in the UAE tends to be higher than in other OECD countries (Mohammad and Borkoski, 2024). Estimates suggest that overall teacher turnover ranges from 20% to 60% across the region. In a recent study, Mohammad and Borkoski (2024) pointed out that for expatriate teachers in public schools, job satisfaction was often tied to "maintenance factors" such as salary, administrative duties, workload, and recognition. This indicates that dissatisfaction with these factors could contribute to a high turnover among this group.

In private schools, teacher turnover can reach up to 15% (KHDA, 2011). Factors that contribute to this turnover include frequent changes in school management, the prevalence of short-term contracts, limited opportunities for career advancement, and challenging working conditions (KHDA, 2011; Saadaoui et al., 2024). However, the UAE continues to adapt its educational methods to meet emerging challenges and to leverage opportunities in a rapidly changing world. The country is committed to developing a high-quality education system that prepares students for global competitiveness and supports the nation's economic and social development. The objectives and initiatives of the National Agenda 2015 and E33 reflect a comprehensive approach to achieving these goals.

School Context

The school selected for the study described in this thesis was established in 1986 and is located in a residential suburb in the emirate of Dubai, and it is part of GEMS Education,

a for-profit company. I have called it the International School of Excellence (ISE)[3]. It is a private, co-educational (mixed gender) school that follows two curricula and is part of GEMS Education. The school is affiliated with the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE) in New Delhi, India. It follows the prescribed curriculum of the CISCE to prepare students for the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education examination in grade 10 and the Indian School Certificate examination in grade 12[4] in secondary school. Furthermore, the school offers IB programmes: the Primary Years Programme (PYP)[5], Middle School Programme (MYP)[6], and Diploma Programme (DP)[7]. The school is accredited by the international boards of the CISCE, the IB, and the Council of International Schools (CIS). Students sit for the aforementioned external curriculum examinations, in addition to the mandated international assessments TIMSS, PISA, and PIRLS.

The language of instruction is English. The school has over 3,500 students aged between three and nineteen years (pre-K to grade 12) and almost 240 teachers, and the largest nationality group among students, teachers and leaders is Indian. There are no Emirati students or teachers at the school. The headteacher had been in the role for eight years when I conducted the research and remains in her position.

Indians represent the largest expatriate population in the UAE, followed by Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, other Asians, Europeans and Africans (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, n.d.). There has been an Indian community in Dubai since the early twentieth century, largely due to the opportunities created by British colonial influence in the Gulf region. Indian migration was driven by a search for employment in trade and commerce, ultimately leading to a significant Indian diaspora in Dubai and the

[3] International School of Excellence (ISE) is a pseudonym for the school where the research took place, ensuring the school's anonymity.
[4] Grade 12 is equivalent to Year 13 in the UK system.
[5] PYP is a framework developed under the IB for students aged three to 12 years.
[6] MYP is a framework developed under the IB for students aged 11-16 years (grades 6-10).
[7] DP is an IB programme that is designed for students aged 16-19 years, it is a two-year curriculum.

wider UAE (Gateway House, 2021). Indians comprise approximately 38% of Dubai's population and are established as the city's predominant expatriate group (Global Media Insight, n.d.). They have played a crucial role in the foundation of educational institutions such as "Our Own English High School", which was established in 1968 in Dubai and continues to thrive. It is vital to understand this historical context and the significant impact of the Indian community in Dubai if readers are to comprehend the dynamics of the selected school, including its student, teacher and leadership demographics.

As stated earlier, ISE is part of GEMS Education, which has a global presence and offers various curricula; this is a defining characteristic of globalised English-medium international schools (Easterbrook, 2022; (Mincu et al., 2024)

While ISE is not derived from the 'Western' educational tradition and its standards are not aligned with those of it, according to Richards (2012), ISE qualifies as an international school since English serves as the medium of instruction and its qualifications are recognised globally upon completion of grade 12. Furthermore, as noted by Independent Schools Council Research, ISE's curriculum is distinct from the national Ministry of Education curriculum (ISC Research, 2024).

Pearce (2023) defined international schools as institutions that offer curricula and programmes different from the national system of the host country. The international schools have grown significantly in recent decades, becoming more complex and diverse (Bunnell and Gardner-McTaggart, 2024). They cater to a range of students, including expatriate children, globally mobile families, and local students seeking an international education. International schools can vary widely in terms of their curriculum, governance (for-profit or non-profit), and target market (premium versus more accessible) (Bunnell and Gardner-McTaggart, 2024). GEMS has different business models that is accessible for all students from various backgrounds. GEMS categorise the schools as mid-market

(least expensive), mid-market plus (affordable) and premium (expensive). ISE is categorised as a premium school.

Hayden and Thompson outlined three typologies for international schools (Pearce, 2023). The ISE can be classified as a Type A ‘traditional’ international school, designed for expatriate families; government schools in the UAE are not open to expatriates. ISE presents a special case as an "internationally-national school" (Pearce, 2023) due to its dual curriculum and predominantly Indian student and teacher population. While it operates within the international schools landscape of Dubai, catering to a sizeable expatriate community, its strong affiliation with the Indian and IB curricula, along with its demographic makeup, distinguishes it from more traditional international schools (Mincu et al., 2024)

Selecting the Case Study School

To answer the research questions, I conducted the research at a private international school in Dubai between December 2021 and June 2022. Before conducting the research, I reviewed the school’s inspection report for the 2018-2019 academic year (Appendix 18), which was the most recent available at the time, as the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted school inspection visits. The report states that the school successfully promotes students expressing their opinions, and “as a result, more students are developing and sharing leadership responsibilities. For example, they are engaged in finding solutions to real-life problems” (p.13).

Based on the inspection reports and the activities I attended on several occasions, I chose this school for various reasons, which are outlined in the table below.

Reason	Details
DSIB inspection rating	The school had been rated ‘outstanding’ by the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau for eight consecutive years.
Positive attitudes and behaviour	Students exhibit very positive attitudes towards their learning and are respectful of others, resulting in excellent behaviour.
Exemplary leadership and student voice	The school showcased excellent examples of leadership activities and student-voice practices across GEMS during different events.
Strong student leadership	Student leadership was highlighted as one of the school's strongest features in the DSIB inspection in 2018-2019, and many of the improvements had been student-initiated.
Successful promotion of student opinions and problem solving	The DSIB inspection report in 2018-2019 stated that the school successfully promoted students expressing their opinions, leading to students developing leadership responsibilities and engaging in finding solutions to real-life problems.

In the UAE school inspection framework, the performance level of ‘outstanding’ is defined as follows: “The quality of performance substantially exceeds the expectations of the UAE” (KHDA, 2015, p.19). For a school to be judged as outstanding, a large majority (61-74%) of its performance indicators must be evaluated as outstanding, and these must include students’ progress, teaching for effective learning, the effectiveness of leadership, and self-evaluation and improvement planning. The remaining indicators must be rated at least very good (KHDA, 2015).

Other important reasons for choosing this school were that it is co-educational, like most international private schools in Dubai, and that the school's vision is to inspire students to become positive changemakers. The students’ activities and participation in various public events made me curious to explore the kinds of activities that the school implemented to cultivate such leadership qualities. I saw the students at many events and functions at which they stood out for their presentation, communication, and problem-solving skills. Their confidence and articulation caught my attention.

Research Context

The notion of student voice “has evolved as both a concept and a set of practices since the 1990s and 2000s” (Cook-Sather, 2020, p.182). Since then, the term ‘student voice’ has increasingly been used to describe activities and practices that provide students with various opportunities to be involved in school decisions, research, school improvement, and reform (Fielding, 2001a; Hart, 1992; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2006; Rudduck, 2007).

Mitra (2004) introduced a "new form of student voice" that the author contrasted with earlier movements that had been focused on student rights. In this approach, collaboration is emphasised among students, teachers and administrators to improve school outcomes. It involves the active participation of students in decision-making

processes as they share their perspectives on issues such as equity and take on responsibility for implementing changes. This collaborative model aims to foster an inclusive and equitable learning environment by valuing student insights and empowering them as partners in school improvement. While many past student voice movements were centred on empowerment and activism, the current focus is on collaboration with school staff to achieve shared goals. This shift acknowledges that students hold valuable knowledge about their educational experiences and can contribute meaningfully to positive change within their context schools. Mitra (2004) states that the “new form of student voice has served as a catalyst for change in schools, helping to enhance teaching, curriculum, and teacher-student relationships” (Mitra, 2004, p.652). Like Mitra, Fielding (2004) and Fletcher (2005) advocate meaningful student involvement that will empower students by engaging them in decision-making to improve schools.

Student voice enables school leaders to understand how students think and “how they can become leaders and participants in school reform” (Kushman, 1997, p.1). Many studies indicate that genuine consideration of student voice increases student engagement and collaboration with adults (Fletcher, 2005; Hart, 1996; Mitra, 2006). The research on student voice has introduced meaningful and valuable student involvement practices and activities (Cook-Sather, 2020; Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2006). It indicates that student voice activities have shifted students' status in schools from ‘passive’ to ‘active’ learners through the development of a collaborative teacher-student relationship that was formerly hierarchical (Mitra, 2006, 2008; Rudduck, 2007). The establishment of collaborative relationships between students and adults, particularly teachers, might be challenging (Beattie, 2012; Mitra, Serriere and Stoicovy, 2012). Nonetheless, it is

feasible in the presence of professional and skilled school leaders and teachers (Lambert, 2003; Owen, 2007; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004).

As a school principal and practitioner in the field, I echo Rudduck's argument that the "student's voice is difficult to introduce and sustain" (2007, p.600) because of factors such as time and power relations. One concern related to time is that involving students in the decision-making process "may take time away from covering the syllabus and preparing for the tests" (Rudduck, 2007, p.601). Another is that it takes time to prepare students for involvement in the consultation process, which requires building trust with them (Rudduck, 2007). Power relations may hinder student voice and decision-making in schools as adults and students "struggle regarding power in developing student voice initiatives, including how best to delegate responsibilities to students, how to provide opportunities for all members to participate, and how to resolve disagreement of opinion" (Mitra, Serriere and Stoicovy, 2012, p.109). Cook-Sather (2020), however, emphasises that student voice and student involvement "do not aim to replace the authority and responsibility of seasoned practitioners and certified professionals" (p.183).

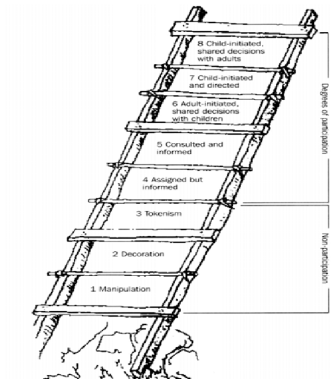
Involvement of all the students within a school in student voice activities is a challenge as usually the offered activities are limited and are available to only a small number of students, mainly high achievers or a select group (Abu-Shamat, 2014; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Participation may be limited because "students feel that they are being pushed to be involved and do not like it or students are inhibited when adults are involved in discussions" (Fletcher, 2005, p.22). On the other hand, the adults may feel threatened when students tell them what should be done or "they might also feel threatened dealing with ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences of students" (Fletcher, 2005, p.22).

Holcomb and Hord (2007) emphasise that students are key stakeholders and that student voices should be heard in schools. Despite the factors that may hinder this voice,

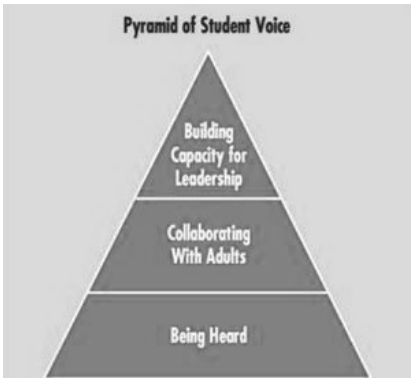
Cook-Sather (2020) asserts that “it is time that we count(ed) students among those with authority to participate both in the critique and the reform of education” (p.3). This topic is discussed in Chapter 2.

Conceptual Framework

This research project examines the concepts of ‘student voice’ and ‘student leadership’ through the application of two key frameworks: Hart’s Ladder of Children’s Participation, developed in 1992, and Mitra’s Pyramid of Student Voice (2006). The models provide comprehensive ways to understand and enhance student voice and student leadership within educational settings. Hart’s Ladder (1992) and Mitra’s Pyramid (2006) informed the implementation of this study and provided the primary perspective for data analysis.



Hart’s Ladder (1992)



Mitra’s Pyramid (2006)

Hart’s Ladder builds on the concept introduced by Sherry Arnstein in her 1969 Ladder for Adult Citizenship (Karsten, 2012). It provides a framework for analysis of the levels of student involvement in decision-making processes. It comprises eight rungs, which range from non-participation to high degrees of participation. The use of this structure enables educators to evaluate the authenticity of student engagement in various initiatives and activities. I applied this framework in this research to explore how the different activities at the ISE facilitated or hindered genuine student participation. In my study, the ladder was used to characterise and evaluate the initiatives and students’ roles at ISE by referral to its eight rungs. The activities that were offered to students in Grades

9-12 at ISE were placed against the ladder's rungs, as explained in Chapter 4, to assess the level of student participation, along with their impact on leadership skills and their role in school improvement processes.

Mitra's Pyramid, which was introduced in 2006, builds upon the foundational work of Hart's Ladder to illustrate “youth development opportunities as student voice is increased in school” (Mitra, 2006, p.7). Mitra's Pyramid demonstrates the development of student voice to foster student leadership; it shows progression from “being heard” to “collaborating with adults” and finally “building capacity for leadership” (Mitra, 2006). The pyramid emphasises the development of student agency and leadership skills. The use of this framework is essential as it demonstrates how students can develop from passive participants to proactive leaders by collaborating with teachers and adults in their schools. Mitra’s Pyramid shows the significance of equipping students with the essential tools, support, and opportunities to take the initiative and lead their peers (Mitra, 2006). In this research, these two frameworks were integrated in order to explore the specific skills and resources that enabled students at ISE to take on leadership roles.

The use of two frameworks within one study is uncommon. However, the integration of Hart’s Ladder and Mitra’s Pyramid for this study created a robust conceptual framework that facilitated the analysis of student engagement and provided practical strategies that would foster student leadership. Through the use of this framework, the research was intended to illuminate ways to amplify student voice and to cultivate a culture of student leadership, which together would ultimately promote an inclusive and empowering educational environment.

Educators can use these frameworks to ensure that educational practices are designed to elevate student voices so that the students can contribute meaningfully to their learning experiences and to the overall school improvement process. They can use them to create authentic activities that enhance student voices and foster student leadership.

First, they can employ Hart's Ladder as a tool to evaluate the current level of student voice activities—whether they are situated at the lower levels of tokenism or consultation or whether they are on the higher rungs of student-initiated or student-led activities. Then, this assessment can be used to inform the application of Mitra's Pyramid to boost student voice and leadership. For example, if an initial evaluation using Hart's Ladder reveals that student voice activities are only at the level of tokenism or decoration, educators can then focus on moving up Mitra's Pyramid by ensuring first that students are truly being heard, then by creating opportunities for collaboration with adults, and ultimately by supporting students to build their leadership capacities.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter contains a critical review of published research and an exploration of its breadth. It highlights the literature deemed particularly valuable for this study. It highlights the significance of this literature in framing the research and its findings, which are discussed and analysed in Chapter 4.

I utilised both deductive and inductive approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to synthesise and analyse knowledge that was relevant to the key concepts in this research: student voice and student leadership. My use of these approaches is explained in Chapter 3. The deductive approach involved the application of theory to data, which enabled a structured analysis that was consistent with existing theoretical frameworks. This method provided a robust foundation for identifying patterns and relationships in the literature.

I followed a systematic approach throughout the literature review to ensure that the selected studies were rigorous and relevant to answering the research questions (Miller, 2024). I began by conducting a comprehensive search of academic databases and journals, using keywords such as "student voice", "student leadership", "student engagement", and "student participation". This initial search yielded a large number of potentially relevant publications. I also drew on existing theories to evaluate the practices at ISE in light of the collected data, referencing Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation (1992) and Mitra's Pyramid of Student Voice (2006) to inform the implementation and to establish the primary perspective for data analysis, as explained in Chapter 1. Use of these frameworks showed the key distinguishing features of student involvement in activities, which proved useful during interviews and discussions with participants at ISE.

To refine the scope, I applied several criteria when selecting studies for inclusion. I prioritised work that had been published within the previous 10 years, to capture the latest research trends and developments in the field. At the same time, I incorporated seminal works and foundational texts that provided essential background and context, such as the pioneering research on student voice by Hart (1992), Fielding (2001a, 2004), Mitra (2004, 2006a), and Rudduck and Flutter (2000, 2004).

Additionally, I assessed thoroughly the quality and methodological rigour of each study, confirming that the research design, data collection method, and analysis were robust. Only studies published in peer-reviewed journals or by reputable academic publishers were included, in line with the recommendations for conducting a systematic literature review (Petticrew and Roberts, 2012; Jesson et al., 2013). Furthermore, I concentrated on research that was closely tied to the crucial themes of student voice and student leadership, as identified in the research questions. I prioritised studies that offered concrete examples of activities related to student voice, strategies for promoting student leadership, and empirical data that highlighted the connection between the two.

The three research questions that guided this study were carefully developed to align with the key themes and concepts identified through the comprehensive literature review. These questions are explained next.

RQ1: What evidence is there that student voice fosters student leadership in ISE?

The literature review explored the evolving definitions and understandings of student voice, highlighting how this concept has progressed from mere consultation to more meaningful forms of student engagement and empowerment (Fielding, 2001a; Mitra, 2004, 2006a). It also examined the relationship between student voice and the development of student-leadership skills, drawing on frameworks such as Mitra's Pyramid of Student Voice (2006a) and Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992). This

provided the foundation on which I would investigate how the specific practices at ISE cultivate student leadership through the amplification of student voice.

RQ2: What meaningful practices do school leaders in ISE implement to amplify student voice?

The literature review delved into the various activities and strategies that schools can employ to foster genuine student voice, ranging from student councils and community service to student-led research projects (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Hart, 1997; Mitra, 2008). It also explored the importance of measuring the quality and impact of these initiatives through the use of models such as Hart's Ladder and Fletcher's Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement (2005). This informed the examination of the specific practices implemented at ISE to engage students and the evaluation of their effectiveness.

RQ3: Why should school leaders foster and support student voice and student leadership at ISE?

The literature highlighted the numerous benefits of amplifying student voice and developing student leadership, including improved academic achievement, better school climate, and the acquisition of essential life skills (Busher, 2012; Lambert, 2003; Robbins and Alvy, 2004). This informed the exploration of the rationale behind ISE's support for these initiatives and the perceived impacts on students and the broad school community.

By aligning the research questions with the key themes and conceptual frameworks identified in the literature review, I was able to build the study on the existing knowledge base and provide novel insights into the relationship between student voice and student leadership within the specific context of ISE.

Throughout the review process, I maintained a critical eye, analysing the strengths and limitations of each study. This allowed me to identify gaps in the published literature and to pinpoint areas that warranted further investigation, as suggested by Jesson et al.

(2013) in their guidelines for conducting a systematic literature review. The synthesis of this diverse body of research enabled me to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge on student voice and student leadership, which in turn informed the design and focus of the present study.

Engagement with the literature in an open and exploratory manner facilitated the discovery of new perspectives and contributed to the production of new theoretical propositions, such as application in an educational context of the holacracy model, which had not been previously reported in the educational literature. On the other hand, the systematic literature review, with its predefined search strategies and inclusion/exclusion criteria, offered a rigorous and transparent way to synthesise existing research (Cronin, 2011). This method reduced bias and provided a comprehensive overview of the current evidence relating to student voice and leadership. The comparison of these approaches – the exploratory and the systematic – enabled both the accidental discovery of new ideas and a strong, evidence-based understanding of the field.

In contrast, using a data-driven, inductive approach enabled me to uncover new insights and emerging themes without being restricted by existing theories, as discussed later in Chapter 4. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise the significance of thematic analysis in the integration of these approaches in qualitative research. Their framework offers a structured yet flexible method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within the data. This literature review uses thematic analysis to combine deductive and inductive reasoning effectively, and thereby to ensure a thorough synthesis that is both theoretically informed and empirically grounded. Thus, the themes discussed in this chapter emerged from the reading of the literature and from the collected data, as outlined in Chapter 4.

The Evolution of the Term "Student Voice" in Educational Research

The education theorist Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of student voice with the suggestion that learners were not merely passive recipients of knowledge imparted by educators but were active builders of their understanding through interaction with their environment. Following Vygotsky, Delpit (1988) suggested that "the teacher cannot be the only expert in the classroom" (p.288). Kozol (1991) highlighted that at the time of his writing, students' voices were still missing from school reform and improvement discussions in the USA; he stated that "the voices of children...have been missing from the whole discussion in education and educational reform" (p.5).

At the same time, Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) posed a thought-provoking question: "What if we treated students as individuals whose opinions truly mattered?" (p.170). This question highlighted the significant lack of student involvement in shaping education, a gap noted by educators and social critics Danaher (1994) and Lewin (1994). This realisation led researchers such as Fine and Weis (1993) and Rudduck et al. (1996) to scrutinise the absence of student participation and genuine engagement in educational decision-making. Danaher (1994) urged policymakers to engage with students, to seek their perspectives, and to listen genuinely to their feedback. Lewin (1994) argued that reforms involving students in decision-making were more effective because they employed students' knowledge and ideas, which would result in genuine education reform. Accordingly, by the late 1990s, the concept of 'student voice' began to gain momentum as a critical component of educational reforms that involved students in education development, as stated by Bradley et al. (2004). Since then, student voice has increasingly been recognised as a fundamental component of effective pedagogy, and this reflects a paradigm shift towards more inclusive, participatory, and dialogic forms of education.

In 1998, the United Nations promulgated a pivotal declaration encapsulated in Articles 12 and 13 that underscores the critical importance of student voice within the framework of children's rights. These articles underscore the fundamental right of children to articulate their views without restraint on issues that profoundly influence their lives. This acknowledgment highlights the critical importance of student perspectives in informing and shaping educational and social policies. Furthermore, the declaration outlines the necessity for children to seek, receive, and share information and ideas across international boundaries using a diverse range of mediums of their choice, such as oral communication, written expression, printed materials, artistic forms, and other communicative methods (UNICEF,1990). This comprehensive framework highlights the importance of recognising and valuing student voices while also stressing the urgent need to create a setting that encourages their active involvement and engagement in discussions that shape their lived experiences and future paths.

In 2000, Rudduck and Flutter advocated pupil participation and consideration of their perspectives in the creation of a new educational experience. Researchers such as Fielding (2001) and Cook-Sather (2006) emphasised that student voice was crucial in educational research and reform. For instance, in 2004, Fielding discussed the importance of the 'new wave' student voice in the renewal of civic society (Fielding, 2004, p.198). Similarly, Flutter and Rudduck (2004) emphasised the value of consulting pupils in school improvement efforts. The scholars stressed that incorporation of true student voices in schools could significantly enhance the educational environment and yield numerous benefits. For example, Mitra (2004) underscored the positive effects of amplifying student voice on young people’s development; this work was supported by various case studies from different schools in the USA.

The progression from Vygotsky's theoretical foundations to modern practice marks a shift towards vibrant, student-focused pedagogy. This consensus underscores the importance of incorporating students' perspectives to improve the quality of education. Over more than 20 years, research has increasingly emphasised the significance of considering student voice in efforts to enhance student participation, teaching and learning within educational settings (Cook-Sather, 2006, 2007; Fielding, 2004; Lodge, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Rudduck and Fielding, 2006; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000, 2004). These works stress the significance of student voice in shaping educational reform and teaching methods. They reflect the increasing agreement among scholars and educators that the integration of student voice into the educational process is crucial to creating meaningful learning experiences and improved academic results.

In Chapter 2 of *Radical Collegiality through Student Voice* (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018), Cook-Sather argues that the terminology around student engagement has evolved significantly, shifting from ‘student voice’ to ‘youth participation’ or ‘student participation’. This change reflects a broader understanding of student engagement that extends beyond the classroom, acknowledging that young people's voices and agency influence their roles within families, communities and society. By emphasising the importance of diverse experiences, Cook-Sather (2018) invites a nuanced exploration of how student voice initiatives can be enriched by considering the multifaceted contexts in which students operate. This expanded scope enhances the relevance of student perspectives and positions them as integral contributors to various societal discourses. Furthermore, Cook-Sather (2018) highlights that the term ‘participation’ implies an active role for young people that moves beyond the mere expression of opinions to the active influence of decision-making processes. She cautions against tokenistic forms of participation, in which students are consulted but they have no power to impact decisions. Similarly, in a recent study, Bragg (2021) highlights educators' frequent rediscovery of "voice practices"

that suggests a cyclical pattern rather than a linear progression. She argues there is potential for superficial adoption of student voice without genuine engagement with its complexities. In many cases, the focus is on easily observable actions, such as student feedback on lessons or facilities, but neglects deeper engagement with student perspectives on pedagogy and power dynamics.

The arguments of Bragg (2021) and Cook-Sather (2018) resonate with what Fielding (2001a) highlights as a common problem with the concepts of ‘student voice’ and ‘student involvement’. Although these terms have become trendy in education, clarity is lacking regarding their practical meaning. He argues that “student voice and student involvement have become increasingly vogue issues, yet we remain significantly less clear about what is meant by them than we ought to be and, equally worrying, even less clear whose purposes are served by their current valorisation" (Fielding, 2001a, p.135).

By 2023, student voice had evolved as it reflected trends toward democratisation, inclusivity, and adoption of shared and distributed leadership approaches. Academic dialogue now emphasises leveraging student voices to create responsive educational environments (Holquist et al., 2023).

Yet, despite numerous efforts to amplify students' voices within educational settings, there remains a significant gap between the literature and practice. Hart (1992) discusses the challenges in the effective implementation of these models in real-world educational environments. This discrepancy underscores the necessity for a more cohesive integration of these theoretical insights into everyday practices in order to elevate and incorporate students' perspectives thoroughly. Furthermore, Mitra (1996) emphasises that while theoretical frameworks exist to promote student participation and empowerment, their practical application is frequently lacking. Fletcher (2005), on the other hand, provides a meaningful guide to student involvement, offering a framework

for students to be partners in school change. Yet, he highlights a gap between the ideal of meaningful student involvement and the reality of its implementation.

Fletcher (2005) also argues that, despite research and expert opinions that emphasise the importance and benefits of student voice, at the time of his writing many schools still operated in ways that neglected or even actively denied students a role in shaping their education. In a recent study, Conner (2022) argues that many schools struggle to incorporate student voice for three reasons. The first is time constraints, as teachers have much to cover in the curriculum and might not have the time for extensive student-led projects. The second is the adult mindset, which leads some leaders and teachers to resist changing their teaching styles or sharing decision-making power with students. The third is a lack of resources to support student voice initiatives; examples of such resources are technology or professional development for teachers.

Kozol (1991) indicates that student voice is under-utilised, and Fielding (2001a) implies that the term ‘student voice’ has become a popular ‘catchword’ in education. Despite the frequent use of the term in recent years, there is no widespread understanding of what this term means in practice. Students and educators have very different ideas about how students can be given a voice or involved in their education. Overuse of the term ‘student voice’ has led to concerns about its ambiguous interpretation by various stakeholders in various contexts and that it may have lost its true meaning. Its use can be influenced by other agendas, such as political pressures or the desire to appear innovative (Conner, 2022; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2001a; Holquist et al., 2023; Mitra, 2004).

To clarify what student voice means and how the definition drove the research, the following section highlights several definitions of student voice that benefit students.

Definitions of Student Voice

Before I explore the various aspects of student voice, it is important to note that the terms 'student voice' and 'pupil voice' are frequently used interchangeably in literature to encompass more than just verbal expression. In this study, I use the term ‘student voice,’ as it is most commonly used when referring to youth participation in student voice activities in a school context. I explored several definitions and reviewed them critically to find the best one to drive this study.

Mitra (2006a) defines student voice as “the many ways in which youth might have the opportunity to participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (p.7). Mitra's definition emphasises that student voice is generally used to refer to how students convey their thoughts and opinions or engage in decisions that affect their lives within the school context and the active participation of young people in school decisions that influence their lives and those of their peers. This view of student voice underscores the importance of inclusivity and democratic engagement within the educational context. However, while this definition may be considered comprehensive, it is also subject to criticism for being excessively broad, which constitutes a significant disadvantage. The phrase ‘many ways’ lacks specificity, and this issue might lead to varied interpretations and implementations across different educational institutions. Moreover, the focus on the impact on peers introduces a collective dimension that may complicate the operationalisation of student voice, as it requires an understanding of peer dynamics and group decision-making processes.

Lambert defines student voice as “the opportunity for students to express their ideas and beliefs and to be heard” (2003, p.56). Lambert's definition narrows the focus to the expression of ideas and beliefs and, therefore, highlights the fundamental aspect of

being heard. This interpretation aligns closely with the principles of democratic education and the recognition of students as stakeholders in their educational journeys. However, this definition is somewhat limited because it does not explicitly address the subsequent actions that should happen in response to students' expressions of their ideas. Simply providing the opportunity to be heard does not guarantee meaningful participation or influence over decisions. Therefore, while Lambert's definition is crucial in acknowledging the expressive component of student voice, it falls short in ensuring that this voice translates into tangible outcomes.

Whitty and Wisby (2007) offer a more straightforward definition that frames student voice as the opportunity for students to contribute to decisions that affect them. They state that student voice “can be understood as pupils having the opportunity to have a say in decisions in school that affect them” (Whitty and Wisby, 2007, p.18). This simplicity is the definition’s strength, as it communicates clearly the essential feature of student voice. Nonetheless, the definition's simplicity might also be its weakness, as it does not delve into the mechanisms or structures necessary to facilitate effective student participation. Furthermore, Whitty and Wisby's identification of the three reasons why schools embrace student voice—children’s rights, active citizenship, and school improvement—provides valuable context and raises questions about the genuine motivations behind such initiatives. Are schools implementing student voice practices primarily for ethical reasons, or are they driven by pragmatic goals of improving school performance and compliance with external standards? For students to contribute meaningfully to school reform, school leaders and educators must recognise their voices by empowering them to share their opinions and ideas in school improvement where relevant, including curriculum, teaching and learning, to influence change.

Overall, the definitions of student voice by Lambert (2003), Mitra (2006) and Whitty and Wisby (2007) each contribute valuable perspectives to the concept. Mitra's (2006)

definition underscores participation and collective impact, Lambert (2003) emphasises the importance of being heard, and Whitty and Wisby (2007) provide a clear, albeit simplistic, understanding of student involvement in decision-making. However, the literature would benefit from a more integrated definition that combined these elements while addressing the practical implementation challenges.

Seale's (2010) definition of student voice provides a comprehensive and aspirational framework by which to involve students in their education. It emphasises the importance of listening, communication, partnership, and empowerment, and aligns well with contemporary educational theories that advocate student-centred learning. Seale (2010) defines student voice in more depth than others:

> *"Listening to and valuing the views that students express regarding their learning experiences; communicating student views to people who are in a position to influence change; and treating students as equal partners in the evaluation of teaching and learning, thus empowering them to take a more active role in shaping or changing their education" (p.995).*

This definition aligns with the broad objectives of this research, which were to explore the dynamics of student empowerment within school settings. Furthermore, it underscores the critical role of student voice in education by emphasising the following three essential elements.

1. *Valuing student perspectives:* it highlights the importance of actively listening to students and valuing their perspectives on their learning experiences. More than just hearing their voices, it is about taking actionable steps based on the students' feedback and perspectives. Such practice fosters a sense of belonging and recognises students as essential contributors to the educational process.
2. *Communication of views for change:* it stresses the need to communicate students' perspectives to decision-makers who have the authority to instigate change. This connection between students and those in power is crucial if student

feedback is to be translated into actionable improvements in the education system.

3. *Equal partnership and empowerment:* this approach stresses the importance of treating students as equal partners in the evaluation of their teaching and learning, which empowers them to take an active role in shaping their education. This collaborative approach enhances the educational experience and develops students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills.

Seale's (2010) definition aligns with the eight rungs in Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation (1992). The notion that students should be treated as equal partners and empowered to take active roles, as described in the definition, reflects the highest rungs of Hart's Ladder, in which young people are fully engaged and their contributions respected and valued. By linking this definition to Hart's Ladder (1992), the study described in this thesis I show the need to advance student participation from passive to active and collaborative levels. This alignment with Hart's Ladder strengthens the study's theoretical basis and offers a perspective by which to evaluate critically the practices and policies that support and obstruct meaningful student participation.

However, the practical implementation of these principles can be challenging, particularly in large schools with established hierarchies. Additionally, the definition assumes a level of maturity and readiness among students to engage as partners, which may not be uniformly present. Therefore, educational practitioners must ensure that support structures are in place to prepare and guide students in these roles.

Holquist et al. (2023) acknowledge the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition and the variation of interpretations that emphasise different aspects, such as collective decision-making or the intention to effect meaningful change. Hence, further exploration

of the true motivations behind the embrace of student voice in schools must ensure that these practices are ethically sound and contribute effectively to school reform. In synthesising Mitra's (2006) emphasis on the collective impact of student participation in school decisions and Seale's (2010) on the fundamental right and empowerment of students to express their ideas and be heard, it becomes clear that understanding student voice requires a multi-faceted approach. Student voice should provide opportunities for expression and ensure meaningful participation that influences school policies and culture. Moreover, the notion of empowerment that is mentioned by Seale (2010) highlights the importance of providing students with autonomy and agency so that they can shape their educational experiences actively. By adopting an integrated perspective that values both the collective and empowerment dimensions, educational institutions can foster more democratic and responsive environments. This approach respects students' rights, encourages active citizenship and leads to school improvement.

Student Voice: The How?

Students should be provided with opportunities to engage in various activities, and it is equally important to understand how to involve them (Hart, 1997). Unfortunately, for some students, participation in activities is superficial or limited to tokenism. Hart's Ladder, which is illustrated in Figure 2.1, serves as a framework to explain the 'how', as it guides educators and practitioners on how to support children's involvement in order to maximise their desire and capacity (Hart, 1997, p.40). Furthermore, it outlines the different degrees of involvement of children and young people in school's projects, organisations or communities (Goździk-Ormel, 2008, p.14).

The undesirable of the eight degrees of children's involvement in activities—'manipulation', 'decoration', and 'tokenism', which fail to facilitate authentic student

engagement—are placed at the bottom of Hart's Ladder. Hart (1992) emphasises the need for educators to steer clear of these three non-participatory forms. Building on Hart's work, Bragg (2007) emphasises that the three forms of non-participatory nature at the bottom of the ladder hinder students from assuming "important roles and may actively exploit them for adults' agendas" (p. 23).

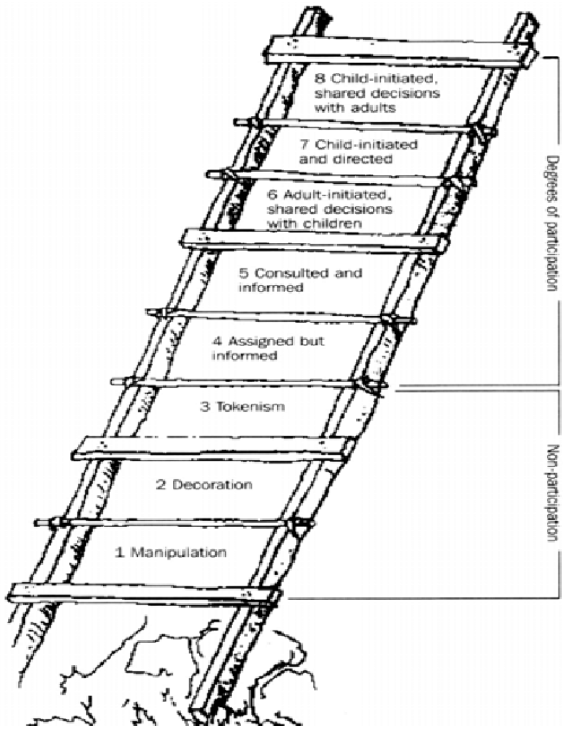


Figure 2.1 The Ladder of Children's Participation (Hart, 1997, p.41, 1992, p.8).

The other five rungs represent genuine models for children's participation. Rung four is labelled 'assigned but informed', which means that adults initiate and run the projects but invite the children to perform specific roles and tasks in the projects; the children are familiarised with the influence of the projects in the community (Bragg, 2007; Goździk-Ormel, 2008; Hart, 1997). Hart (1997) refers to this kind of participation as social mobility. It can be used as a first step to allow the students to see their impact on the community and their roles in attracting other children to such projects. Moving upward, rung five, 'consulted and informed', means that students are involved in the consultation process and their opinions are considered throughout the implementation process (Goździk-

Ormel, 2008; Hart, 1997). If rung five is linked with Seale's definition, there is a precise alignment with the practice of involving students in the consultation process. To meet the requirements of rung six, 'adult-initiated, shared decisions with children', projects must involve children and youngsters in decision-making as partners to the adults while the adults initiate the project (Goździk-Ormel, 2008). To reach rung seven, which is 'child-initiated and directed', children must initiate ideas and carry out projects without the interference of adults. In this model, adults provide support when needed. Finally, at rung eight, 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults', children and young people initiate projects and ideas and involve adults as partners in the decision-making process.

One of the main criticisms of this ladder, as mentioned by Treseder (1997), is that it "shows participation as a progressive hierarchy" (p.7). It may urge practitioners to reach the top of the ladder regardless of the local situation or children's capabilities (Goździk-Ormel, 2008); it also "limits the choices for those wishing to involve children" (Treseder, 1997, p.7). However, school leaders can overcome this challenge by providing students with choice and allowing them to participate at "the highest level of their ability" (Hart, 1997, p.42). Furthermore, school leaders and teachers should take into account that some children may not wish to participate in reaching their maximum participatory potential in all the projects.

School leaders can find an alternative model that best fits their school's context and culture. Many other children's participation models do not imply a hierarchical structure (Karsten, 2011). For instance, Treseder (1997) reworked Hart's Ladder and introduced the five top rungs presented by Hart through a circular model to give them equal value. In this model, Treseder states that one should regard "the five degrees of participation as five different, but equal, forms of good practice and choose the activities that will have the most benefit in a specific environment" (Treseder, 1997, p.8) and for the targeted students.

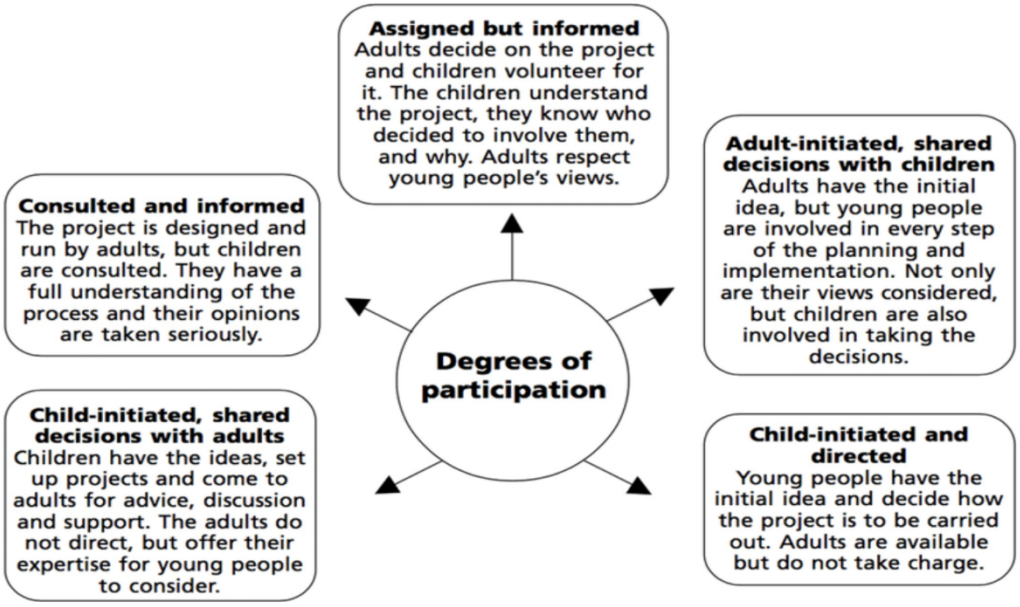


Figure 2.2 Treseder's model - Empowering children and young people: promoting involvement in decision-making (Treseder, 1997, p.8).

Regardless of which models the leaders decide to follow, the approach should foster diverse, inclusive, and meaningful student participation by prioritising student choice, ensuring they can participate at levels aligned with their interests and potential, providing authentic and impactful opportunities, and avoiding tokenism so as to achieve meaningful involvement. Finally, the chosen method should implement continuous reflection and feedback mechanisms to assess and adapt strategies, in order to ensure that it meets student needs and contextual realities effectively.

Typologies of Student Voice

Researchers have constructed several typologies to categorise student voice activities within educational settings. For example, Lee and Zimmerman (1999) outline student voice in terms of a three-tiered continuum from passive (information source) to active (participant) to directive (designer). Similarly, Fielding (2001b) presents a range of types of student engagement, from passive to active. At the basic level, students serve as sources of information by completing surveys. At a higher level, students engage as active respondents in discussions and consultations, but they must initiate these

dialogues. When they act as co-researchers, students collaborate with educators on research and decision-making, and this collaboration promotes a sense of partnership. Lodge (2005) and Fielding (2001b) argue that “three questions are crucial: who is being asked, about what, and how?” (p.133). Fielding (2001b) stresses a set of questions that should be answered about speaking and listening. The questions represent a two-way communication method and are listed in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Set of Questions that should be answered about speaking and listening (Fielding, 2001b, p.100).

Speaking
Who is allowed to speak? *To whom* are they allowed to speak? *What* are they allowed to speak about? What *language* is encouraged / allowed?
Listening
Who is listening? *Why are they listening?* *How are they listening?*

Consideration of these questions is essential to ensure that the use of the student voice leads to a genuine and effective collaboration between students and adults. Building on these questions, Mitra’s Pyramid (2006) illustrates a clear framework by which to identify the types of student voice that develop leadership (Figure 2.3). Mitra researched youth engagement in educational settings and, based on Hart's Ladder (1992), she identified the three typologies of student voice that were mentioned earlier: ‘being heard’, ‘collaborating with adults’, and ‘building capacity for leadership’ (Mitra, 2006).

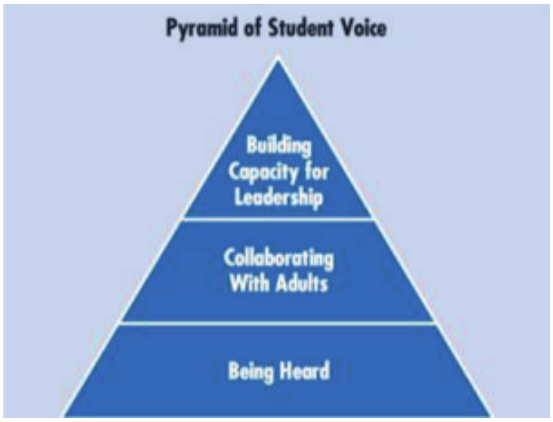


Figure 2.3 The Pyramid of Student Voice (Mitra, 2006a, p.7).

The most widely employed type is ‘being heard’, which involves adults listening to students to gather information and raw knowledge for school reform or research (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2006). This type is focused on the creation of opportunities for students to express their opinions and experiences, often through surveys, focus groups, or councils. In such cases, students are considered “sources of data” (Fielding, 2001a, p.135).

The second, ‘collaborating with adults’, involves students and educators working together to make decisions, which fosters mutual respect and shared authority. The third typology, ‘building capacity for leadership’, is intended to develop students' leadership skills by involving them in governance and reform initiatives, and thus to prepare them to take leadership roles within their schools and communities. These typologies highlight the importance of student voice in the promotion of democratic education, enhancement of school improvement efforts, and fostering of a sense of agency and empowerment among students. The pyramid illustrates how genuine student involvement fosters skills development and enhances student leadership capacity.

In a more recent study, Benner et al. (2019) introduced student voice typologies by placing together the Spectrum of Student Voice Oriented Activity, which was developed by Toshalis and Nakkula in 2012, with Mitra’s Pyramid, introduced in 2006. The result is shown in Figure 2.4.

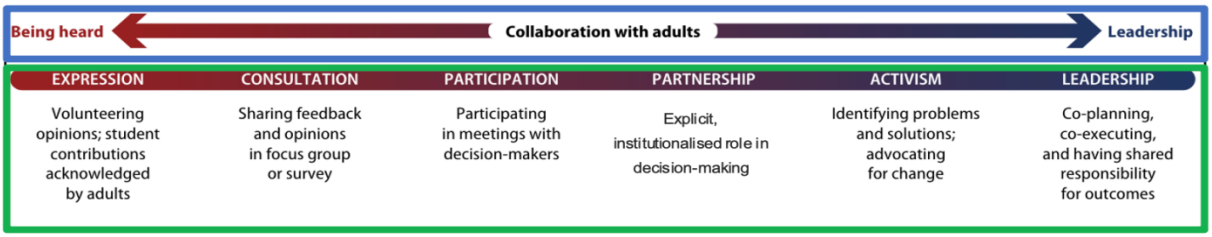


Figure 2.4 Adapted version of student voice typology produced through linkage of Toshalis and Nakkula’s Spectrum of Student Voice-oriented Activity (bottom in green frame) with Mitra’s Pyramid of Student Voice (top in blue frame) (Benner et al., 2019, p.4).

I consider Toshalis and Nakkula's spectrum to be a blended model of Hart's Ladder (1997) and Mitra's Pyramid (2006a), which are the two conceptual frameworks that I refer to throughout this thesis. The spectrum offers a detailed and comprehensive typology of student involvement in educational settings. This typology underscores the diverse ways in which student voice can manifest, from simple expression of opinion to fully fledged leadership. Therefore, it highlights the importance of fostering a culture that values and integrates student perspectives at every level. This spectrum resonates with the practices that were shared in this study by participants at ISE; these practices ranged from 'expression' at the foundational level to 'leadership,' the peak of student engagement, in which students collaboratively plan, execute, and share responsibility for outcomes. Taken together, the spectrum and Mitra's Pyramid provide a robust framework through which to understand and enhance student voice in schools in order to foster student leadership. However, for this framework to be fully effective, there should be practical implementation strategies, consideration of contextual factors, and mechanisms to support and build student readiness for higher levels of involvement. Proposals for these factors are discussed in Chapter 5.

Developing Student Voice through Meaningful Engagement

What is Meaningful Engagement?

Fletcher (2015) defines meaningful student involvement as "the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change to strengthen their commitment to education, community, and democracy" (p.5). Similar to Hart (1992) and Mitra (2006), Fletcher (2005) argues that student involvement becomes meaningful when it transforms into a genuine partnership between students and adults who collaborate to improve schools. This means that school leaders should avoid tokenism and work closely with the students to empower them to participate actively in finding solutions to challenges

that they all face in learning, teaching, and leadership. Fletcher (2005) introduced the Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement, as shown in Figure 2.5.

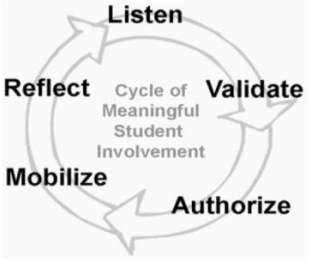


Figure 2.5 Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement (Fletcher,2005, p.6).

Fletcher (2005) states that this cycle emphasises the use of a structured approach that fosters authentic partnerships between students and adults in the education process and that ultimately enhances student voice and leadership. While individual steps of this cycle may be used in schools, their connection to school improvement and one another is often lacking. However, the integration of these steps into a cohesive cycle fosters meaningful, effective, and sustainable partnerships between students and adults. By embracing this approach, schools can enhance student voice and leadership, and can create an environment in which students feel empowered to contribute to their education and advocate for their needs and perspectives. This cycle enriches the educational experience for students and strengthens the overall school community by fostering collaboration and shared ownership of the learning process. The cycle can be a good reference for school leaders to ensure that the involvement of students in decision-making or student voice activities is meaningful and effective.

School-wide and Classroom Activities

In this section, several examples of meaningful student voice activities are discussed, and divided into two categories: school-wide activities and classroom strategies to amplify student voice.

School-wide Activities

Student Consultation and Engagement

Student consultation "rests on the principle that pupils can bring something worthwhile to discussions about schooling … it is nested within the broader principle [that pupils should participate in schooling decisions]" (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.5). This means that at some point, students should be given active roles to participate directly in school issues to solve problems (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). One of the most common examples takes the form of 'student councils', which are "used in the decision-making process to voice needs and concerns and to make proposals" (Goździk-Ormel, 2008, p.25). Student consultation "can mean so many things – from eliciting opinion, which is managed later, to a hands-off encouragement of self-determination" (Treseder, 1997, p.7). Student consultation and engagement may include sharing feedback and opinions in focus groups or surveys (Benner et al., 2019).

Student Council and Parliaments

A leading student voice activity in schools is student councils and parliaments (Klein et al., 2003; Trafford, 2003). Student councils "provide a useful means of introducing the key principles of citizenship and the democratic system" (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.62) and are "traditional ways of participating in the decision-making process" (Goździk-Ormel, 2008, p.25). Yet Lauren (2006) argues that the concept of student voice in student councils is under-explored, mainly because there is a lack of comprehensive research on such councils. Most of the available studies are practical guides that are focused on the logistics of running elections and meetings rather than providing a framework to ensure the participation of all students at the class and school levels. However, "educators are calling for the involvement of student council members in matters relating to teaching and learning" (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.58).

The establishment of student councils in schools plays a vital role in nurturing essential

skills for the council members, such as problem-solving, decision-making, planning and organisational skills (Klein et al., 2003; Trafford, 2003). However, Rudduck and Flutter (2004) argue that if the students are not ready to participate in a school council, their roles will be limited to fundraising and presence at special occasions and activities rather than being involved in school reform and pedagogy. Rudduck and Flutter (2000) stress the importance of preparing the students to ensure effective consultation:

> *"…if the school is not ready for pupil participation, then a school council can become a way of formalising and channelling students' criticisms; an exercise in damage limitation rather than an opportunity for constructive consultation. And the agenda of schools councils often do not roam far outside the charmed circle of lockers, dinners and uniform" (p.83).*

School councils typically comprise one or two student representatives from each grade, from primary to secondary levels (Klein, 2003; Lambert, 2003; Trafford, 2003). One disadvantage of traditional student councils and parliaments is that in many cases, the benefits are confined to a small number of students, as "only a minority of pupils…have a direct involvement in the school's council's activities" (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.62). To address this issue, Lambert (2003) proposes that guidelines are set to establish genuine governance. First, students should be selected for the council by asking them "to identify criteria for participation and invite nominations from them and their peers, ensuring sufficient representation to provide an authentic voice" (Lambert, 2003, p.57). Second, it is essential to "connect student participation in governance with congruent school and classroom practices" (Lambert, 2003, p.57).

Community Service and Civic Engagement

Other than citizenship education, which is addressed through a special curriculum as a legal requirement (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004), some activities enhance students' responsibility towards their communities. Robbins and Alvy (1995) argue that involving students in projects and activities that serve their communities improves the quality of their lives and positively affects the whole school environment. The most popular

community service activities that schools undertake include voluntary work (Goździk-Ormel, 2008; Menezes, 2003) and charity events (Owen, 2007). Scouting is a popular civic engagement activity in most countries and is implemented to promote citizenship. Menezes (2003) highlights that involving students in civic engagement activities positively affects their involvement in political functions in the future, such as voting. Moreover, the trust of students who are involved in civic engagement activities is increased in the national regime and government.

Students as Researchers

The involvement of students as researchers leads to their active participation in educational research (Fielding, 2001b; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004), such as action research collaborating with teachers and adults (Fletcher, 2005; Hart, 1997), and positioning them as inquirers, problem-solvers and researchers from a young age (Hart, 1992). This approach represents the highest level of student engagement as they are positioned as leaders in identifying research topics, conducting investigations, and presenting findings to the school community. Moreover, it emphasises respect for and valuation of student perspectives, potentially leading to creative solutions and driving meaningful change within the school and beyond (Fielding, 2004).

Several case studies from around the world highlight the involvement of children in action research projects that have addressed various environmental and ecological issues (Fielding, 2001b; Hart, 1997). For instance, Mitra (2008) provides examples of students engaging in a research project to improve their school's sustainability practices. Similarly, Fletcher (2005) argues that one of the most meaningful examples of student involvement is students as school researchers, in which students take the lead in data collection and analysis, and contribute ultimately to school improvement and the wider community.

Other scholars have also emphasised the importance and benefits of student-driven research. Cook-Sather (2002) discusses the empowerment of students who are given a voice in educational research that leads to more democratic and inclusive education practices. Thomson and Gunter (2007) highlight how students can bring unique perspectives and insights that adults may overlook, and therefore enrich the research process and outcomes.

Fielding (2004) also advocates the use of the ‘radical collegiality’ model, in which students and teachers collaborate as equals in the research process and therefore foster a profound sense of community and shared purpose. Bragg (2007) explores the concept of student voice and its impact on education change, noting that when students are involved in research, they become more engaged and motivated to contribute to their schools' development. The developmental benefits for students involved in research include enhanced critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills (Kellett, 2010). Moreover, students' involvement as researchers contributes to school improvement and promotes an inclusive and participatory educational approach. It empowers students and validates their insights as valuable contributors to educational dialogue.

Extracurricular Activities and Competitions

Clubs and other extracurricular activities are held outside regular school hours in many schools. They are common in both state- and privately funded schools, but they are implemented in different ways and may be executed inside or outside schools (Marsh and Kleitman, 2002). The activities have various purposes and are customised to target different age groups or grades. Other than academic subjects, extracurricular activities provide students with access to learn about different areas according to their interests and talents, such as visual and performing arts, dance, music, sports, drama and scouting (Holloway, 2002; Marsh and Kleitman, 2002).

Miller (2001) cites youth development and educational programmes as the main types of after-school projects that may amplify student voice and foster student leadership in schools. Similarly, Robbins and Alvy (2004) argue that successful extracurricular activities "offer leadership opportunities" (p.221).

Despite these benefits, studies indicate that student participation in after-school activities is low; most students do not engage in after-school programmes, for various reasons (Heath et al., 2018; Hofferth and Jankuiene, 2001). Factors such as time constraints, lack of parental support, access or transportation, and financial barriers limit many students' chances to participate, and these issues raise concerns about equity and inclusion (Heath et al., 2018; Miller, 2001). Moreover, pressure to participate in a wide range of activities can result in student burnout, which may negate positive effects (Heath et al., 2018; Thiessen and Cook-Sather, 2007).

Holloway (2002) stresses that extracurricular activities and after-school programmes must have several characteristics if students are to be encouraged to participate willingly and sustain their involvement. For instance, the activities should encourage peer interaction, promote cooperation, build student-adult relationships, provide structure,

challenge the students and connect them to the school (Holloway, 2002). Participation may be encouraged through the creation of a sense of belonging and addressing student disaffection by fostering inclusive environments in which students feel valued and respected (Thiessen and Cook-Sather, 2007). Furthermore, Fletcher (2005) emphasises the importance of meaningful student involvement and highlights the risk that some extracurricular events may not offer genuine opportunities for leadership, decision-making or personal growth, and thus fail to engage students in a truly enriching way.

Although these activities are widespread in schools, there is no straightforward tool that can be used to measure their impact on students. Hence, they should undergo an ongoing evaluation to assess whether the activities are appropriate for the students' age, needs, and interests (Miller, 2001).

Hart (1997) highlights that competition can be an effective student voice strategy as it promotes collaboration and community benefit. Rather than focusing on individual achievements, prizes can be awarded to schools or organisations, encouraging collective participation. For instance, the Peak National Park Planning Authority in England offers an art competition in which the school judged best overall receives an engraved plaque and trees. Similarly, the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) in 1990 introduced Italy's ‘Let's Design the Future’ competition (Hart 1997), which encouraged students to propose local environmental improvements using various media. A winning team from Palermo transformed an abandoned garden into an ecological park, and this earned them a stay at a WWF reserve and the opportunity to collaborate with a town architect.

It is essential to create a supportive and inclusive school environment, address practical barriers, offer a diverse range of meaningful activities, and enable students to express their ideas and contribute significantly to decision-making processes in order to

encourage broader student participation in extracurricular activities. These elements enhance student voice and boost student involvement (Fletcher, 2005; Hart, 1997; Heath et al., 2018; Thiessen and Cook-Sather, 2007).

Classroom Strategies to Amplify Student Voice

In addition to school-wide strategies, the literature highlights classroom strategies that can be used to strengthen student voice and build student leadership. Since classrooms are the primary environment in which students are taught academic, life, learning, and technological skills the strategies may incorporate experiential, reflective, dialogue, action, collaborative and cooperative learning (Owen, 2007). Activities that are based on these strategies encourage student participation and enhance their motivation. However, a critical examination of these strategies reveals important nuances and complexities that educators must consider.

Class Meetings as Democratic Processes

Lickona (1991) and Hart (1997) emphasise the value of class meetings as a means of involving students in decision-making and of promoting a democratic classroom environment. Class meetings can enhance collaborative experiences and ensure that all voices are heard (Lickona, 1991). However, Fielding (2004) cautions that such initiatives can sometimes become tokenistic if students are given a platform to speak but their opinions are not genuinely integrated into the decision-making process.

Talking Circles and Group Discussions

Talking circles and group discussions are effective methods that can be used to amplify student voices and create a safe environment for students to share their views (Schmidt et al., 2005). However, these approaches may not involve students directly in

decision-making processes, and therefore may limit their agency and the integration of their voices into the broader school context.

Journals, Learning Logs and Reflective Practices

The completion of journals and learning logs by students, and the use of other reflective practices, are valuable ways to strengthen student voice and enhance self-awareness (Hart, 1997; Schmidt et al., 2005). Through the use of these tools, students are able to express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. However, the literature emphasises the importance of practical assessment and the use of feedback mechanisms to ensure that student voices are genuinely heard and valued.

Role-Playing and Graphic Organisers

Role-playing and graphic organisers are highlighted as dynamic educational tools that can create opportunities for students to explore different perspectives, articulate their ideas, and engage in meaningful discussions (Hart, 1997; Schmidt et al., 2005). These approaches can cultivate empathy, communication skills, and a sense of ownership over the learning process.

Cooperative Learning and Equitable Participation

Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy that can ensure equitable participation and provide a platform for students who might otherwise resist engaging in the learning process (Schmidt et al., 2005). Cooperative learning can transform classrooms into dynamic environments that celebrate diverse viewpoints and empower all students to make meaningful contributions.

The literature indicates that holistic and collaborative approaches are essential to address the complexities and challenges of boosting student voice in the classroom. Researchers underscore the importance of stimulating strong partnerships among students, teachers, and school leaders, in which all stakeholders work together to

cultivate a shared understanding of the value of student voice and to develop comprehensive strategies for its implementation (Fielding, 2001a; Hart, 1997; Mitra, 2006, 2008). Such holistic and collaborative approaches can help to ensure that schools do not simply pay lip service to student voice but treat it as a transformative force within the classroom and the wider school community.

To navigate the nuances of student voice and to develop the skills and dispositions necessary to engage with and respond to student perspectives effectively, Rudduck and Flutter (2000) emphasise the need for ongoing professional development and support for teachers to help them to overcome factors that may hinder student voice within classes. Teachers require the skills to work to create class environments in which student voice is not only encouraged but also meaningfully integrated into the decision-making processes that shape students' educational experiences.

Student Voice – A Critical Perspective

Despite the benefits of student involvement in decision-making and student voice initiatives, various scholars have pointed out challenging issues. The literature on student voice highlights that student participation in discussions and efforts that are traditionally led by adults can sometimes hinder the cultural shift in education research and reform that advocates seek (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004; Rudduck, 2007; Taylor and Robinson, 2009). Some critics argue that some students do not possess the necessary knowledge, experience, or maturity to make informed decisions about complex education matters. They emphasise the importance of balancing student input with the expertise of educators and administrators (Mitra, 2006b). However, it is important to note that the criticisms mentioned below do not necessarily negate the value of student voice. Instead, they highlight the need for careful consideration and planning

of its implementation to ensure that it is effectively empowering and leads to equitable and sustainable improvements in education (Mitra, 2006b). Four criticisms represent the most common conceptual and practical challenges regarding student voice: *power dynamics, homogeneous 'voice', a limited number of students, and language.*

Criticism 1: Power Dynamics

A key issue raised in the literature is the potential for power imbalances between students and teachers, which can undermine the authenticity of student voice (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000). Students may hesitate to share their true opinions, particularly on sensitive issues, if they perceive that their views could negatively impact their relationships with teachers or their academic standing. This power dynamic can limit the level of empowerment that students feel they have to express themselves. For instance, the encouragement of student voice during consultation in education settings may disrupt traditional power dynamics and create uncertainty for both students and teachers about the limits and possibilities of their interactions (Rudduck, 2007). This uncertainty often leads to anxiety, as both groups may worry about the potential for negative criticism and struggle to understand what is acceptable within these consultations. In schools in which students evaluate their teachers through surveys or verbal feedback, especially during inspections such as those run by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (known as Ofsted) in the UK and the DSIB in Dubai, the teachers may feel nervous about what the students say about them, further complicating the dynamic (Rudduck, 2007). Similarly, Silva (2001) highlights:

> *"There is the danger of even well-intentioned student voice initiatives: some efforts to increase student voice and participation can reinforce a hierarchy of power and privilege among students and undermine attempted reforms" (p.98).*

This uncertainty in power relations means that despite good intentions, student voice initiatives may reinforce existing hierarchies and privileges among students and may undermine the reforms that these initiatives are intended to accomplish (Silva, 2001). Another criticism is that student voice initiatives may lack sufficient power or resources to effect meaningful change (Fielding, 2004). They might be relegated to tokenistic roles at the lower level of Hart's Ladder (1992) and offer input that ultimately is ignored by those with decision-making authority.

To overcome this challenge, Cook-Sather (2006) argues that the cultivation of an authentic student voice requires a shift in the power dynamics between students and adults in education settings. This involves acknowledgement of the existing power imbalances and active work to create more equitable relationships among students, teachers, and researchers. Student voice is not simply about giving students a platform to speak but about genuinely listening to and respecting their perspectives, in order ultimately to gain student engagement and a sense of value within the classroom (Cook-Sather, 2006). Furthermore, there is a need to establish clear and respectful communication protocols when incorporating student voice so as to ensure that it does not become a platform for negativity or personal conflicts (Czerniawski and Kidd, 2011).

Criticism 2: Homogeneous 'Voice'

The term 'voice' carries an inherent ambiguity, as it suggests a singular, homogeneous voice rather than multiple, diverse voices (Cook-Sather, 2006; Thomson, 2011). Authors such as Cook-Sather (2006) and Lundy (2007) argue that the term 'student voice' can mislead, as it suggests a singular perspective and oversimplifies the diversity of students' views. This oversimplification risks tokenism and manipulation rather than genuine cultural shifts in schools (Fielding, 2004). Cook-Sather (2006) cautions against generalisations that weaken reform efforts. Hence, there is a crucial

need to include many student voices, especially those that are often unheard or that emanate from those who choose to remain silent or passive (Linden and Fertman, 1998; Mitra, 2008). In a recent study, Holquist et al. (2023) argue that students represent diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, and the assumption that they speak with a single, unified voice fails to capture that diversity. Thomson (2011), on the other hand, advocates the understanding of student voice as a plurality/majority, with acknowledgement of the complexity of student experiences. The use of various student voice activities and approaches to engage with this diversity is crucial for effective and genuine student engagement.

Criticism 3: Limited number of students

In terms of practical issues, various studies, including those by Mitra (2008), Mitra and Gross (2009), emphasise the positive impact of student voice on school improvement and detail the types of student voice activities that can be conducted in schools. These case studies highlight schools that have created customised programmes or initiatives to amplify student voices and foster student leadership, such as the case study in Whitman School in San Francisco – USA (Mitra, 2008). However, there is a significant gap in research regarding strategies to ensure that these initiatives represent the entire student body. Most studies have focused on selected groups of students who may not have represented the student body as a whole. These students are often chosen based on criteria such as high academic achievement, election processes, or nominations by school leaders or teachers.

One of the main challenges in the student voice initiative is ensuring that all student voices are represented, especially in student councils. For example, a disadvantage of successful student councils and parliaments is that the benefits are limited to a small

number of students as “only a minority of pupils…have a direct involvement in the school council’s activities” (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.62). Similarly, Fielding (2001) highlights a critical concern: that few students participate in student voice initiatives. He argues that the involvement of limited numbers of students means that the voices of a significant portion of the student body are not heard. Furthermore, traditional approaches to student voice, such as student councils or surveys, often attract students who are already engaged and vocal. This can create a self-selecting group that may not fully represent the diverse perspectives and experiences of the wider student population (Fielding, 2001). Czerniawski and Kidd (2011) report that student voice is influenced by factors such as diversity, cultural backgrounds and personal predispositions. Some students, especially those from marginalised or underrepresented groups, might not feel sufficiently secure or empowered to share their views, and this may restrict their engagement.

Criticism 4: Language

Students who are reluctant to engage may shy away from traditional written or verbal feedback methods, and this may lead to responses that reflect the preferences of educators rather than authentic student perspectives. Many students feel uncomfortable speaking or meeting with adults to share their views, especially when they doubt that their voices will be valued due to differing opinions. This is a major issue for students from marginalised groups, including those with disabilities, who may perceive that their voices are not appreciated or that existing frameworks fail to address their particular concerns (Czerniawski and Kidd, 2011; Fielding, 2004).

Language can significantly hinder student voice, particularly in cases in which students face challenges in expressing themselves verbally due to language constraints (Proctor

et al., 2021). A lack of proficiency in the language used may inhibit individuals' ability to communicate thoughts, ideas, and feelings effectively. This limitation not only affects their participation in discussions but also diminishes their confidence and sense of belonging within the learning environment. As a result, students may struggle to share their perspectives, and this ultimately impacts their overall engagement with and contribution to the class community.

Language barriers are a significant issue, especially for students whose first language differs from the language of instruction used in the school, which in international schools is usually English. In these schools, mother tongue languages are neither taught nor developed (Czerniawski and Kidd, 2011). Although this issue was not prominently observed at ISE, some students were hesitant during interviews and preferred not to speak publicly. Others provided short or repeated responses to surveys, even those that used open-ended formats.

Robinson and Taylor (2007) emphasise that student voice extends beyond mere spoken or written words; it includes how students express their feelings and viewpoints regarding their learning and school experiences. Numerous studies have explored the use of diverse methods to capture this range, including images, drama, social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, and interactive tools such as Padlet and Jamboard. This approach resonates with Thompson's (2011) emphasis on recognising diverse forms of communication and encouragement of educators to move beyond traditional notions of voice and embrace the multimedia environment in which students operate.

Educators and leaders can engage students by implementing strategies like photovoice, student-driven research and digital storytelling, or by incorporating the arts. The *Student Voice Handbook* (Czerniawski and Kidd, 2011) highlights that language poses a

conceptual challenge regarding student voice; Thompson (2011, p.22) notes that "voice is expressed in words". This author argues that student voice should encompass more than images and a blend of spoken and written texts, even taking into account digital media. This limited perspective can restrict discussion and overlook alternative forms of expression, such as performing and visual arts. An emphasis on ‘voice’ alone may ignore how children utilise various media and genres. There must be recognition that we exist in a multimedia environment with multiple expressive pathways and that children discover that engagement in artistic forms, such as performing and visual arts, provides a meaningful and effective way to understand the world and to communicate their ideas (Thompson, 2011).

Student Voice and Leadership

The previous section contained an explanation of how student voice signifies students' perspectives, opinions, and contributions that shape their educational journeys and experiences. Conversely, student leadership encompasses students' actions and initiatives to lead and drive change within their schools and communities. In the following section, I illuminate the concept of leadership and explore various leadership styles that can enhance student voice and promote student leadership. Analysis of the connection between student voice and leadership development with empowerment of students to express their views can lead to more effective and engaged leadership in education environments. This relationship underscores the vital role that student voice plays in shaping individual experiences and fostering a collaborative culture within the school context.

What is Leadership?

Leadership “is the most prominent organisational science research field, which has become increasingly multifaceted and interdisciplinary as it has evolved” (Clark and Harrison, 2018, p.514). We often hear people in different fields talking about leadership.

Leadership research is a fast-growing and enormous field in which various concepts, theories, and definitions have been proposed. Due to the size of the field, the number of definitions of leadership is vast. For instance, Richmon and Allison (2003) noted that the literature contains more than 350 definitions of leadership. This aligns with Stogdill's statement that the number of definitions of leadership is nearly equivalent to the number of individuals who have tried to define it (Stogdill, 1974, p.7). With the many definitions, styles and theories, Burns' statement from more than 40 years ago remains valid: "Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (1978, p.2).

Many scholars define leadership as the ability to influence the actions of others. They also define a leader as a person who is seen to influence others' actions in either formal or informal ways. Others identify a leader as having the ability to inspire and motivate others to follow a common cause. The understanding of leadership has evolved; the first leadership theory, 'The Great Man,' which was introduced in 1840, suggested that leaders were born with inherent traits and were sent from God (King, 1990), whereas nowadays, many researchers argue that people in different fields have the potential to lead. They do not limit leadership to the 'trait theory'. For example, Linden and Fertman (1998) state that all people have leadership potential. They argue that people "lead in many places and many ways every day. An individual's ability to use his or her skills and recognise the situational influences that can support and promote leadership is critical to realising leadership potential" (p.8).

King (1990) presented the different kinds of leadership theories that were later illustrated by Clark and Harrison in 2018, as shown in Figure 2.7. The figure illustrates how leadership theories have evolved, reflecting the changing views of what makes an

effective leader. It presents a chronological overview of leadership theories, highlighting their evolution from early concepts to modern approaches. It starts with the Great Man theory. The figure categorises the development of leadership theories into several eras: the trait, influence, behaviour, situational and contingency, transactional, transformational, and finally, the culture and anti-leadership eras. The theories in the latest era focus on contemporary ideas such as authentic leadership and distributive leadership, indicating a shift from traditional, individualistic views of leadership to collaborative and context-driven perspectives.

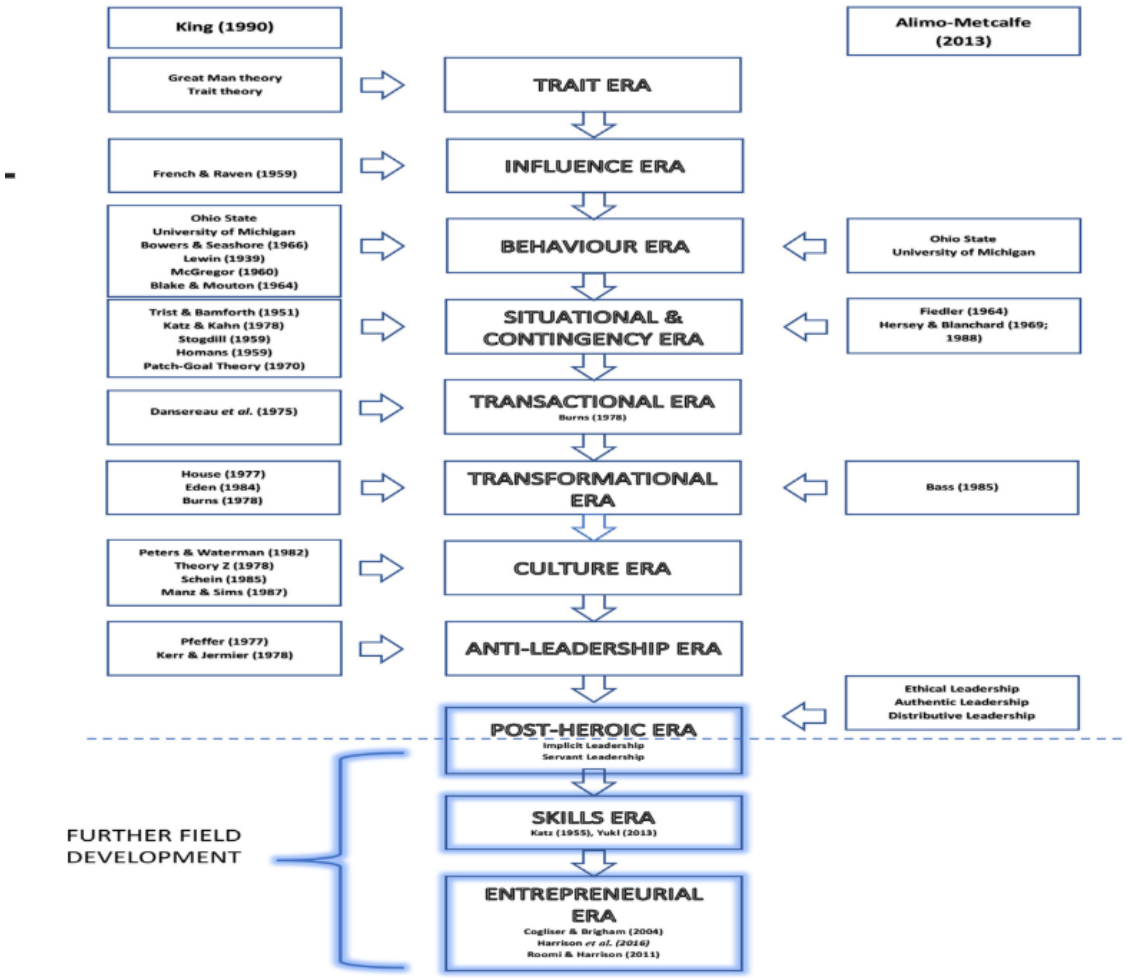


Figure 2.6 The evolution of leadership theories (Clark and Harrison, 2018, p.516).

In the next section, I discuss leadership models that enhance student voice and promote student leadership. The terminology reflects a shift from simplified 'styles' to more comprehensive models that encompass established practices, behaviours, and values,

emphasising the multifaceted nature of integrated educational leadership (Leithwood, 2023). This allows for a theoretically grounded understanding of how leadership boosts student voice. These models include distributed leadership, which was highlighted by many of the participants during the data collection. Additionally, I explore other leadership approaches that emerged from the data, such as shared, collaborative and servant leadership.

Leadership Models to Boost Student Voice and Student Leadership

The research on education leadership does not use the term ‘student leadership’ in relation to school improvement, and there is limited research on how school leaders can amplify student voice to foster student leadership. Dempster and Lizzio (2007) emphasise that students should be provided with ample leadership opportunities; in their study, they found that students desired more access to leadership roles within their schools. They argue that empowering students with leadership opportunities nurtures personal growth and enriches the school environment during the development of their leadership skills. While ’integrated educational leadership’ (Leithwood, 2023) is not directly focused on student leadership programmes or specific strategies for developing student leaders, similar to Dempster and Lizzio (2007), it highlights the importance of creating a supportive and equitable school environment in which students feel empowered to take the initiative and make a difference, both of which actions are preconditions for student leadership.

Many researchers highlight that school leaders play a vital role in leading and managing change in schools and in shaping the school culture to intensify student voice and cultivate student leadership. Based on the data collected at ISE, I explored the literature to shed light on the different leadership frameworks that achieve these aims. For

instance, school leaders should avoid directive, authoritarian and hierarchical leadership models in which the headteacher holds power and controls daily operations through micromanagement in a form of 'one-person show'. Instead, school leaders should adopt one or a combination of the three types of leadership, *distributed, collaborative,* and *shared,* if they wish to enhance student voice and leadership (Carpenter, 2015; Deal and Peterson, 2009; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkin, 2008; Mitra, 2005; Yada and Jäppinen, 2022).

The three leadership style terms do not have the same meaning in literature but they are used interchangeably in practice to describe the same leadership approach. For example, a school might embrace *distributed leadership* by encouraging *shared leadership* among teachers within their teams and *collaborative leadership* with parents and the community. It is essential to build positive relationships between adults and students in order to make the leadership model successful (Fitzsimons et al., 2011; Harris, 2011; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Pearce et al., 2007).

Akiva and Petrokubi (2016) stress that a foundation of mutual respect must be created. To build strong and positive relationships between students and teachers, adults should treat students as partners and value their opinions and perspectives. The school should have open communication channels and encourage open dialogue and active listening to help everyone understand and address concerns effectively. The building of positive relationships and rapport will overcome one of the criticisms of student voice, the power relationship, by moving from the notion that an education setting emphasises adult authority over students (Fielding, 2004; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Hart, 1997; Mitra, 2005, 2006; Robinson, 2008).

Distributed Leadership - Empowerment

Research suggests that distributed leadership is a practical approach for school improvement and reform (Harris, 2011). Distributed leadership is a broad concept that challenges the traditional, hierarchical leadership model. It recognises that leadership can be shared and distributed among individuals or groups, regardless of their formal positions. It focuses on *who* holds leadership influence and *where* it exists within a system (Fitzsimons et al., 2011). Robinson (2008) explores the concept of distributed leadership in education settings and its potential impact on student outcomes. He argues that a distributed approach to leadership, in which leadership responsibilities are shared among staff rather than concentrated in a hierarchical structure, can lead to a greater density of instructional leadership, more innovation, and, ultimately, more positive student outcomes.

Robinson (2008) suggests two main arguments in favour of distributed leadership. First, this approach allows schools better to identify, develop, and utilise the expertise and talent of their staff, which is crucial for meeting the diverse learning needs of students. Second, it promotes sustainability in school improvement efforts as more staff members are knowledgeable about and invested in improving educational outcomes.

Mitra (2005) calls for the use of distributed leadership to strengthen and support student voice in school decision-making. The researcher argues that in many cases, traditional, hierarchical leadership structures marginalise student perspectives, while a distributed approach allows for greater student participation and leadership in school reform efforts. She emphasises the importance of adults working in partnership with young people to develop equitable relations and to encourage a sense of shared responsibility for school improvement. Such shared responsibility represents the highest degree of participation on Hart's Ladder (1997).

Distributed leadership research is often focused on the school as a whole. Through this leadership approach, students are empowered as important and valued stakeholders to contribute their perspectives and to shape the direction of their schools. Spillane (2005) stresses that distributed leadership challenges the traditional 'hero' narrative of school leadership, arguing that it inaccurately centralises leadership in the headteacher and overlooks the importance of leadership practice. Instead, Spillane (2005) proposes a distributed leadership model and emphasises the interaction between leaders, followers, teachers, students and the situation. This perspective suggests that leadership is not determined solely by individuals or external factors but emerges from the dynamic interaction of these elements.

Fitzsimons et al. (2011) argue that the distribution of leadership tasks across several roles within a school creates a more empowering student environment that leads to effective student leadership. Implementation of a distributed leadership model can create opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and responsibilities, and such opportunities cultivate student engagement and ownership of their learning. To promote student leadership, the distributed leadership style is aligned with both the highest rungs of Hart's Ladder, as explained earlier, and with Mitra's Pyramid, as it supports the student voice by enabling students to participate in decision-making processes and influence education practices and school reform. At ISE, students were allowed to lead and be part of the decision-making process through a distributed leadership model, which could also be described as holacracy.

Holacracy

During data collection for this study, the 'holacracy' model was mentioned several times as an example of distributed leadership. Holacracy can be considered a type of distributed leadership, as it is a complementary management structure that removes

traditional hierarchies and distributes authority (Gupta and Jena, 2023). In literature, holacracy is defined as “a form of self-management that confers decision power on fluid teams, or ‘circles,’ and roles rather than individuals” (Bernstein et al., 2016, p.39), as shown in Figure 2.7.

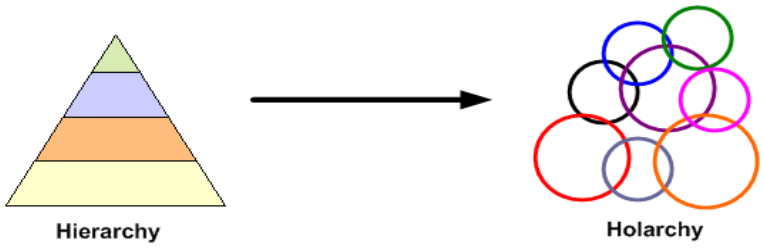


Figure 2.7 Transition from a hierarchical to a holacratic system (Talyer, 2019).

The term holacracy originates from Greek. It was introduced by Arthur Koestler in his 1967 book *The Ghost in the Machine*. It merges the Greek word ‘holon’, which means whole, with the suffix ‘cracy’, which translates to power or government. Thus, a ‘holacracy’ is an organisation that is governed by a self-sufficient group (Rossignol, 2023).

Gupta and Jena (2023) define holacracy in organisational management and business as a management structure that differs from traditional hierarchical models in that, instead of decisions flowing from the top down, employees share authority among themselves. Essentially, the organisation operates without a 'higher management' structure. A holacracy is a governance framework that distributes authority and decision-making and, therefore, enables distributed leadership. Yet, it may not fit every school or culture (Rumage, 2024).

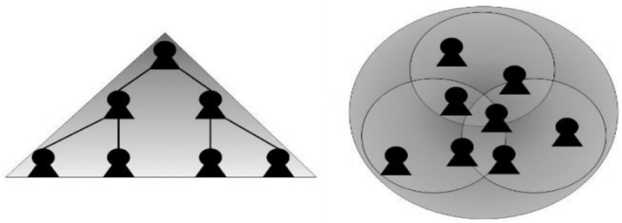


Figure 2.8 Hierarchy model vs. holacracy model (Gupta and Jena, 2023, p.10).

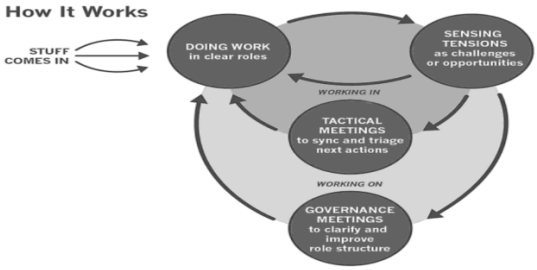


Figure 2.9 How authority is distributed in the holacracy model (Robertson, 2015, p.27).

The holacracy system was developed by Brian Robertson, who founded the company HolacracyOne to promote this method and train others in its use. Robertson developed the concept at his company Ternary Software, where he experimented with various organisational techniques in 2001. Influenced by agile software development, sociocracy, and other management theories, Robertson evolved the theory of holacracy through iterative experimentation and adaptation. It emphasises distributed authority, clear roles, and an integrated decision-making process to enhance organisational clarity and responsiveness. The first formal version of the holacracy Constitution was launched in 2009, and it has undergone several updates, the latest in 2024. Users of this system aim to create an adaptive and purpose-driven organisational structure that is moved away from traditional hierarchical management and towards consensus-based decision-making. The system continues to evolve, driven by feedback from its growing user base.

Holacracy has been primarily adopted by businesses and organisations that are interested in innovative governance and management structures (Robertson, 2014). While there is no literature about how this management system or leadership model is

relevant to schools, it may be practical for those education settings in which students do not need hierarchy or authority to collaborate with adults and work with their peers on different student-led projects, as is the case at ISE.

Moreover, the principles of holacracy could be applied in schools, because its core ideas, such as clear role definitions, responsive adjustments to roles and processes and a focus on purpose alignment, could benefit schools that wish to innovate their leadership and education approaches. However, the extent to which holacracy could be used explicitly in schools would vary and would not be as familiar or well-documented as it is in the business world.

Since ISE was able to implement this model, it's worth considering it in the educational context, which may challenge one of the crucial critiques, the participation of a limited number of students in the student voice activities, as was the case at ISE.

Collaborative Leadership - Partnerships

Distributed and collaborative leadership work together. Collaborative leadership is a working style that emphasises shared decision-making, open communication, and teamwork. It fosters a culture of shared goals and joint decision-making and creates an environment of trust, shared purpose, and open communication. Furthermore, it focuses on *how* leaders work with their students, teachers, and teams. Fielding (2004) describes students as partners; he argues that this mode of interaction should emphasise collaboration between students and teachers as dialogue becomes central and a more equitable relationship is cultivated in which student perspectives are valued and contribute to shared decision-making processes (Fielding, 2004). A collaborative leadership style is essential to the development of collaborative relationships between students and adults at the school level, as per Mitra's Pyramid (2006a). The

cooperation and collaboration between teachers and students will foster student leadership, as Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010) stress that,

> …the transition from students as recipients of information about leadership decisions to fuller collaboration with staff and assumption of responsibility for management decisions implies the emergence of a much higher level of student leadership (p.165).

Moreover, 'collaboration with adults' is highlighted in the student voice spectrum that was introduced by Toshalis and Nakkula in 2012 as an essential step before moving to leadership, as shown in Figure 2.3.

The collaborative leadership style encourages genuine and effective student participation at the high level of Hart's Ladder, as shown in Figure 2.1. Collaborative leadership is an essential style that should be adopted in schools by school leaders, teachers, and students.

Shared Leadership - Teamwork

During the interviews that were performed for this study, the participants did not mention the 'shared leadership' model as they described their practices in terms of the distributed leadership model. However, while exploring the literature, I found that the practices of the school leaders and students at ISE resonated with the description of shared leadership. They may have described this leadership approach but did not explicitly connect them to the scholarly concept. Moreover, the participants were focused on describing the actual leadership behaviours and student engagement rather than trying to categorise them into theoretical frameworks. For them, the practical realities take precedence over the academic terminology.

Shared leadership is “a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to achieve group or organisational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence” (Pearce and Conger, 2003, p.1). In a recent study titled *Principals’ Perceptions about Collective Competences in Shared Leadership Contexts*, Yada and Jäppinen (2022) examine how school principals perceive collective competencies in shared leadership environments. Through interviews with 12 Finnish school leaders who implement shared leadership, the findings indicate that principals understand shared leadership as a complex idea that includes behavioural, attributional, and relational components. The research highlights nine essential themes of collective competencies: shared meaning, shared accounts, collective mindset, knowledge sharing and creation, context development, broad participation, relational perspectives, group collaboration, and shared goal-oriented beliefs.

These findings highlight the significance of collective competencies in the promotion of successful shared leadership within education settings. The participants at ISE exhibited the same competencies as they spoke the same language, shared the same purpose, and had the same growth mindset, which was apparent when the students were allowed to work at the school as researchers. While collective decision-making with the students was not a strong feature at ISE, this leadership style was evident in the school leadership responsibilities among the senior leaders and teachers. This finding aligns with Hart’s Ladder (1997) and Mitra’s Pyramid (2006a). This leadership style empowers students to be part of the decision-making process, characterised by shared control and shared responsibility.

Servant leadership

Servant leadership was one of the leadership styles used at ISE. As discussed in the literature, servant leadership prioritises followers' development over task management. Influential leaders reflect on their influence and encourage self-reliance among team members, and this system creates a culture that embraces learning and growth (Hebert, 2003). Coetzer et al. (2017) argue for a shift in schools from traditional hierarchies to a co-leadership model, in which students and teachers collaborate with principals. Critical attributes of servant leaders that have been identified in studies include risk-taking, compassion, honesty, and active listening (Coetzer et al., 2017; Spears, 2010).

Servant leadership in schools is an approach that prioritises meeting the social, professional, and academic needs of teachers, students, and staff (Saadaoui et al., 2024). It emphasises the creation of a supportive and nurturing environment that cultivates growth and well-being. Saadaoui et al. (2024) highlight that servant leadership in schools has positive impacts that can lead to stronger school communities that encourage and promote a sense of belonging and collaboration among staff members. Focusing on shared goals and mutual respect contributes to a stronger school community overall. Furthermore, servant leadership empowers teachers and students and makes them feel heard and valued as they are involved in decision-making processes. This can lead to increased levels of motivation and creativity, and a greater sense of ownership over their work, which reflects positively in the students' performances and outcomes.

Servant leadership aligns closely with Hart's Ladder (1997) and Mitra's Pyramid (2006a), as it provides a valuable framework for promoting authentic participation among children. It emphasises the significance of listening to students and involving them in decision-making. This leadership style was used by ISE as it created safe spaces in which children could express their views and opinions freely. ISE's trustful and caring environment

supported student voice initiatives that helped to develop the students' leadership initiatives; this development represented the highest rung of Hart's Ladder (1997).

Educational Leadership

The literature on educational leadership offers valuable insights into the crucial role that school leaders play in cultivating a culture of learning within educational institutions. However, the conceptualisation and enactment of educational leadership have evolved over time, with researchers presenting divergent perspectives on the core elements and effectiveness of such leadership. Robertson (2008) emphasises that the term educational leadership encompasses various dimensions, so that it goes beyond mere positional authority. According to Robertson, impactful educational leaders should cultivate a learning culture that involves students, colleagues, and the broad community. This perspective aligns with those put forward in scholarly discussions on the significance of creating inclusive learning communities that extend beyond the confines of the class (Robertson, 2008). Building on this foundation, Caldwell (2003) refines the understanding of educational leadership, arguing that it is fundamentally about "nurturing a learning community" (p.26). This perspective shifts the focus from the individual leader to the collective capacity for learning and growth within the institution. However, the literature is divided on the specific leadership styles and practices that best facilitate the development of such learning communities.

Fielding (2001) and Mitra (2018) advocate leadership approaches that empower teachers and students by involving them in decision-making processes and cultivating a sense of ownership and agency. These researchers contend that collaborative and distributed leadership models are essential to drive meaningful school reform. In contrast, other scholars have highlighted the continued prominence of more directive, principal-centric models of instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2005; Supovitz et al., 2010). Leithwood (2023) presents a significant contribution to the literature, as the paper

attempts to integrate the disparate conceptions of instructional leadership and transformational leadership. Leithwood suggests that the combination of these two leadership approaches can have a more profound impact on classroom instruction and student achievement than either approach in isolation. This integration of instructional and transformational leadership practices offers a more comprehensive understanding of effective educational leadership.

Furthermore, Leithwood's introduction of the "personal leadership resources" framework represents a valuable addition to the literature, as it acknowledges the importance of leaders' cognitive, social, psychological, and ethical capacities in shaping their leadership effectiveness (Leithwood, 2023, p.x). This holistic perspective challenges authors' historical tendency to focus primarily on observable leadership behaviours and practices.

Overall, the literature on educational leadership reflects an evolving and complex landscape, with researchers grappling with the most effective ways to conceptualise and enact leadership within educational contexts. The integration of instructional and transformational leadership approaches, along with the consideration of personal leadership resources, represents important avenues for future research and practice in this critical domain. These emerging frameworks offer the potential for a more holistic and nuanced understanding of how school leaders can cultivate the conditions necessary for meaningful school improvement and enhanced student outcomes. However, the literature also highlights the persistent tensions and divergent perspectives within the field, emphasising the need for continued critical examination of educational leadership models and their contextual relevance. Ultimately, the literature suggests that the path towards effective educational leadership remains multifaceted and contested, and that navigation of the complex realities of twenty-first-century schools requires ongoing dialogue and empirical investigation.

Student Leadership

Youth leadership, student leadership, and adolescent leadership are terms that are often used interchangeably in literature to describe the type of leadership that students exhibit at the school level. Throughout this research paper, I refer consistently to the concept of 'student leadership' to encompass the various aspects of leadership that are exhibited by students within the school environment, including their empowerment, influence, and proactive engagement in school-related activities.

Zeldin and Camino (1999) define youth leadership development as providing experiences to help young people develop competencies to lead others long-term. This understanding is essential to determine the appropriate leadership type for this research. Owen (2007) argues that student leadership has no straightforward meaning; however, "to develop leadership in schools, there needs to be some clarification of what it is that is trying to be achieved" (p.6). While leadership might have different meanings, Kouzes and Posner (2014) stress that "everyone has the capacity to lead, whether or not they are in a formal position of authority or even part of an organised group" (p.6). Student leadership does not involve students taking senior or authoritarian positions in a school context. School leaders and teachers work with students to supply them with essential life skills required for adulthood and career life, and this work results in the cultivation of student leadership.

Owen (2007) and Kouzes and Posner (2014) challenge the common belief that only a few people are born with natural leadership abilities, which is part of the Great Man theory. For instance, Owen (2007) argues that students and teachers all have the potential to become leaders:

> *"…one of the myths about leadership is that it is inherent in some people and not in others. In reality, every child has some leadership potential. In the same way, all teachers, whether they teach primary or secondary education, arts or geography, have the capacity in their everyday classroom activities to enable young people to realise their leadership potential" (p.5).*

The assertion that every child has leadership potential suggests a more inclusive understanding of leadership. This perspective encourages the idea that leadership skills can be cultivated rather than being solely dependent on natural ability. It positions leadership as a set of skills and behaviours that can be developed through experience and education. Teachers play an essential role in nurturing leadership qualities among students.

Owen's argument implies that all teachers are responsible for creating environments that foster student leadership inside the classrooms and beyond. This could involve the implementation of teaching strategies that promote critical thinking, collaboration, and decision-making among students.

According to Lambert (2003), Owen (2007) and Kouzes and Posner (2014), all students have the potential to become leaders. However, the effective implementation of leadership programmes or activities for all students and understanding the factors that influence the realisation of their leadership potential may be challenging and require considerable effort. For instance, Covey (2008) quotes one school leader who objects to involving all their students in leadership activities: "Let's face it!...Not every one of these

students is going to grow up to be a CEO [chief executive officer] or prominent leader. It is just not going to happen" (p.11). On the other hand, Kouzes and Posner (2014) highlight that leadership "is not about being a president, captain, director, editor, CEO, general, or prime minister … it's not about celebrity, wealth, or even age" (p.6). Student leadership focuses on the basic principles and values to prepare students "to take responsibility for their lives, to work with others more effectively, and to do the right thing even when no one is looking" (Covey, 2008, p.11).

Kouzes and Posner (2014) state that "leadership is everyone's business" (p.6); it involves setting an example, positively impacting the school community, and inspiring others to do the same. Through authentic and value-driven actions, student leaders build trust and a supportive environment for everyone around them (Kouzes and Posner, 2014). Hart (1997) emphasises that "all children can play a valuable and lasting role" (p.3), but that children's participation or involvement in decision-making depends on their developmental capabilities, skills and interests. To develop and embrace students' voices before they graduate from school, the students should be empowered and able to lead "as early as possible" (Cody and McGarry, 2012, p.150). Lambert (2003) argues:

> *"…educators can make the following key assumptions about student leadership: all children have the right, responsibility, and capability to be leaders, leadership can be understood as a reciprocal, purposeful learning in community, learning communities should be designed to evoke leadership from all the children, leading is a public expression of learning" (p.55).*

According to this view, student leadership should not be linked to an official title or specific leadership role in a hierarchy; all students of all ages are capable of and have the right to participate in various student leadership activities. Lambert (2003) also asserts that "because every student can learn, every student can lead" (p.55). Similarly, Owen (2007) argues that any student "in any classroom, can play a leadership role" (p.6). Lambert (2003), Mitra (2006), and Covey (2008) offer examples of successful

engagement by educators in schools in different countries of students in various leadership activities at very young ages. For instance, Covey (2008) states that some educators in some schools are “teaching basic leadership principles to young students as young as five years old” (p.4). Similarly, Hart (1997) states that students can be engaged in environmental research, planning, and management projects from the age of four years to 12 and above.

Linden and Fertman (1998) define leadership for adults and adolescents. They highlight that leaders think independently, articulate their thoughts and feelings, and assist others in understanding and acting on their beliefs. They influence others ethically and with social responsibility. For many, leadership manifests as a compelling urge to share ideas, energy, and creativity while not letting personal insecurities hinder them. Being a leader means having confidence in one's instincts in leadership roles and actions. This definition shows adolescent and adult leadership in a new light. It suggests that leadership consists of skills and attitudes that can be learned and practised, and that all adolescents have the potential to develop these traits. “The definition is broad enough to include students who are not currently seen as leaders in their schools, communities, or homes as well as those who already demonstrate their leadership skills and attitudes in more obvious ways” (Linden and Fertman, 1998, p.18).

Dempster and Lizzio (2007) advocate that the focus should be shifted from the application of adult leadership theories to the understanding of student perspectives on leadership. They argue that while existing theories provide a foundation, new research should prioritise increasing our understanding of how students perceive leadership, where they see its necessity, and who they believe should be involved. This aligns with the arguments presented by Patrick (2022) in recent research; the researcher challenges the traditional view of student leadership as a solely pedagogical exercise or activism

and instead advocates student representation within educational leadership structures. By providing opportunities for students to exercise leadership, schools can cultivate essential skills such as communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and decision-making. Patrick (2022) contends that this student-centric approach is crucial for gaining a nuanced understanding of student leadership.

Dempster and Lizzio (2007) suggest that future research should explore knowledge and understanding of student leadership. They highlight that there is a growing interest in student leadership, which may stem from the perception that there is a decline in the number of people willing to assume leadership roles in their adult lives. This concern, which is prominent in the corporate world, extends to the education sector, in which the pool of potential leaders has shrunk. This made me think: are we overwhelming students with many tasks that make them feel they do not want to take on responsibilities?

Abundant research on adult leadership may have led researchers to seek new perspectives, and student leadership offers a fresh avenue for exploration.

Student Voice and the Generation of Leadership

Student voice is essential to nurture student leadership, as the leadership arises from the amplification of student voice. According to scholars such as Mitra, Lambert, Cody and McGarry, student leadership develops in democratic classrooms and schools where student voices are invited and heard (Cody and McGarry, 2012; Lambert, 2003). Lambert (2003) and Mitra (2006b) argue that effective student voice can promote student leadership. I use the Lambert (2003) definition of a student leader:

> *"One who has found her own voice, contributes to the world around her, and understands that her future is integral to the success of her community and society. Student leadership emerges from democratic classrooms and schools in which student voices are invited and heard" (p.56).*

Lambert (2003) stresses that “the student voice is the most fundamental issue in student development” (p.57), because providing students with a democratic platform to express their voice “helps develop student learning and leadership” (Lambert, 2003, p.57). Accordingly, one of the main reasons to involve students in meaningful student voice activities is to develop their leadership skills (Fletcher, n.d.). Similarly, Linden and Fertman (1998) emphasise that “leadership development provides adolescents with a voice in the decision-making process that impacts their lives” (p.16). Mitra's Pyramid emphasises that it is crucial for students to feel that their voices are being heard before they can take on leadership roles. The literature review and data from ISE indicate that developing strong partnerships with students, amplifying their voices, and collaborating with them are essential steps toward the cultivation of student leadership, as outlined in Hart's Ladder (1997).

Ways to Measure Student Voice and Student Leadership

The literature review did not identify a measurement tool that could be utilised to evaluate the effectiveness of student voice or student leadership activities. The measurement of the impact of such activities is not as simple as the assessment of teaching and learning through classroom observations that are based on a clear rubric or criteria. The leaders at ISE confirmed that they had nothing with which to measure the initiatives other than the percentage of students who participated in the school’s activities and each student’s presentation skills and character during the various activities, such as performances and assemblies. Fletcher (2005), however, developed the ‘Ladder of Student Involvement in School’ to help educators measure student involvement in school activities. It is based on Hart’s Ladder and is shown in Figure 2.11. On this ladder, the higher the rung, the more meaningful the activity will likely be for students. The ladder shows educators and practitioners how to support children's involvement.

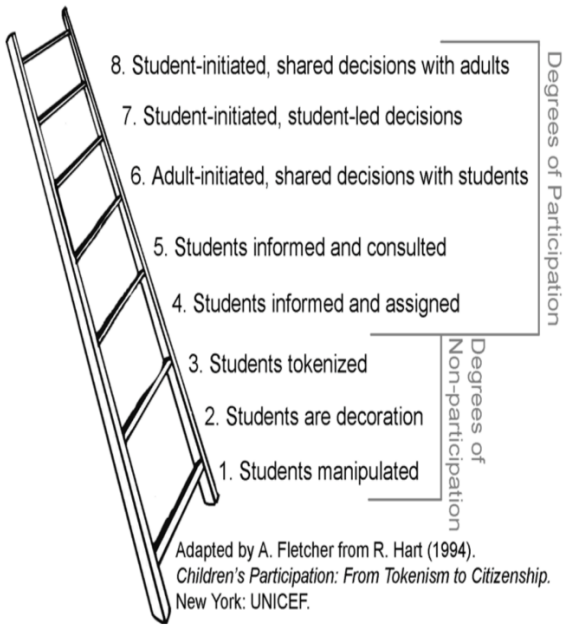


Figure 2.10 Fletcher's Ladder for Measuring Student Involvement.

While the ladder does not present a rigid checklist, it can be considered a guide for ongoing reflection and improvement in creating meaningful student involvement. It can act as a measurement tool in the following ways:

- *Identification of the current level:* school leaders can use the ladder's descriptions of each rung to assess the current level of student involvement in a particular activity, project, or even the school as a whole.
- *Set goals:* the ladder provides a framework by which to set goals to move student involvement to higher rungs. For example, if an activity currently sits at 'students informed and assigned', educators can aim for adult-initiated, shared decisions' by incorporating student input in the design phase and preparing the students to move to the higher level on the ladder.
- *Track progress:* schools can track their progress over time by periodically reassessing their position on the ladder. This helps to identify areas of improvement and celebrate successes in fostering meaningful student involvement.

- *Promote reflection:* The use of the ladder encourages critical reflection on the quality of student involvement. It challenges educators to move beyond superficial participation and strive for authentic student-adult partnerships and collaboration.

The Impact of Student Voice and Student Leadership

Studies show many benefits of meaningful student involvement and participation. Hart (1992), for instance, argues that it is essential to recognise and promote children's participation not just for the benefit of the children themselves but for the betterment of society. Fletcher (2005) suggests that the impact of meaningful student involvement can be observed across different levels: individual students, classes, schools, and even school systems. The most significant and lasting impacts are seen when meaningful student involvement is sustainable and embedded in the school's culture. Figure 2.12 illustrates how the impact of meaningful student involvement scales with its reach and depth.

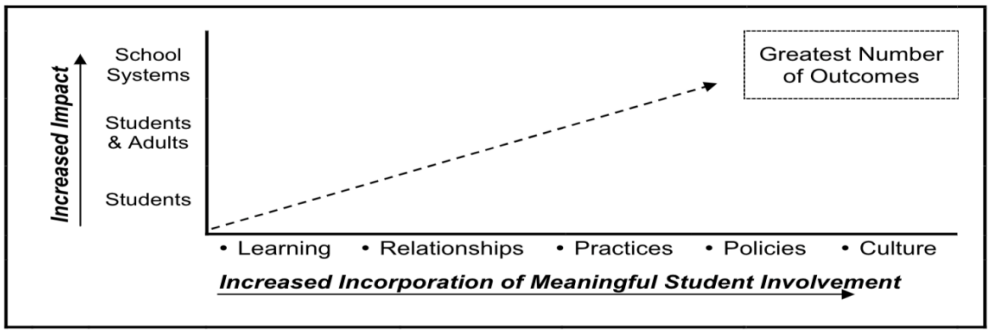


Figure 2.11 Outcome Connections (Fletcher, 2005, p.10).

Meaningful student involvement empowers student voice, engagement and learning at the individual level. When embraced in classes, it nurtures collaboration, student-teacher relationships, and ownership of learning. At the school level, it cultivates a positive climate, student leadership, and community partnerships. Finally, system-wide adoption promotes equity, student voice in policy, and robust school-family-community connections. The figure underscores that the transformative potential of meaningful

student involvement is intensified as it becomes increasingly systemic and embedded within the educational context.

Fletcher (2005) highlights that “the actual impact of any form of student involvement depends on the number of students directly involved in the activity, type of activity being undertaken, and the long-range sustainability of the project beyond the involvement of a particular student or students” (p.10).

Enhanced Academic Achievement

Few studies have explored any direct correlation between student leadership initiatives and students’ academic achievement. Those that have are divided on the impact of student leadership on students’ academic performance. Mitra (2008) stresses that to boost students’ academic performance, “it makes sense to go straight to the source – students” (p.20). Yet some researchers have found no direct link between leadership initiatives and academic achievement. Covey (2008), Lambert (2003), Schmidt (2005) and Reeves (2008) claim that student leadership leads to improved academic achievement. Similarly, Guskey and Aderman (2008) state that students who are given responsibilities and are empowered “tend to prefer more challenging academic tasks, set higher educational goals, and persist when confronted with difficult tasks” (p.9). Furthermore, Busher (2012) argues that student leadership activities encourage greater “student engagement in learning by giving them a sense of ownership of the process and the school institutions in which their work is located” (p.113).

Others argue that it may be distracting for students to be involved in leadership activities at school, and that academic achievement is improved merely through intensive study. For example, according to Deng et al. (2020), students who participate in leadership activities must “work harder” on their studies than their peers to improve their academic

levels. Deng et al. (2020) argue that leadership activities might harm a student's academic performance because leadership "takes time away from the study" (p.2).

Although a direct connection between student leadership initiatives and students' academic achievement cannot be established, and more research is needed in this area, the significance of the positive impact of students' leadership initiatives on the development of improved learning skills cannot be denied. Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010) stress that

> *"…full engagement of student leadership and student voice suggests that schools can see value in fostering such developments for the benefit of improving teaching and learning and in helping to engage students as active participants in their education" (p.168).*

The argument is that if students can learn to think more independently and critically to solve problems, they will use the same skills in their studies, and this will positively impact their academic performance.

Improved Attendance, Discipline and Behavioural Outcomes

According to Robbins and Alvy (2004) and Lambert (2003), the positive impact of meaningful student leadership initiatives results in better attendance rates and reduced dropout rates.

Many researchers agree that student leadership activities help to decrease school behavioural problems and increase students' positive and meaningful involvement (Brooks and Goble, 1997; Covey, 2008). Schmidt (2005) agrees that student leadership activities in schools may help students to develop a culture of self-respect and respect for others, which may boost their self-control and lead to improved discipline and fewer behavioural problems in school. For instance, Busher (2012) highlights that

> *"…involving students directly in school decision-making about issues of immediate relevance to their own lives, such as teaching, learning and school organisation, helps to develop their sense of citizenship by constructing respectful cultures in schools" (p.114).*

Development of Essential Life Skills

Schmidt (2005), College (2006), Flutter and Rudduck (2004), Busher (2012), Covey (2008), Owen (2007) and Mitra (2006) connect leadership initiatives at schools to students' development of essential life and employment skills, such as problem-solving, time management, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, planning, organisation, decision-making, and interpersonal skills. Lambert (2003) argues that students develop social competence due to such initiatives. In addition, according to Covey (2008), College (2006) and Owen (2007), such activities boost students' levels of self-confidence and motivation.

Student leadership initiatives help students to develop many skills. However, there is a need to measure the impact of the activities through the use of different variables, such as reduced levels of absenteeism, improved behaviour, fewer disputes, better grades, and increased levels of personal satisfaction.

Conclusion of the Literature Review

The evolution of student voice in education research has demonstrated a trend towards greater levels of student agency, but other possible advantages continue to be debated. Early consultative approaches, while ostensibly valuing student input, often functioned as a means for adults to validate their pre-existing assumptions about schooling, rather than genuinely to empower students (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018). Subsequent participatory models, although offering increased student involvement, risked tokenism and the potential for co-opting student voices for institutional agendas if they were not carefully implemented. The emergence of partnership approaches signals a promising shift towards shared power and decision-making, yet the inherent power imbalances

within education settings require ongoing critical reflection to ensure authentic collaboration. Furthermore, the very definition of 'student voice' remains fluid and contested, and this situation raises questions about whose voices are privileged, whose are marginalised, and how these voices are interpreted and utilised within research and practice. This necessitates use of a critical lens to examine not only the stated intentions of student voice initiatives, but also their practical implementation and the potential for reproducing existing power dynamics.

There is no straightforward meaning of the terms 'student voice' and 'student leadership'. Researchers have identified many benefits of student voice and highlighted different student voice activities that can be instigated to ensure genuine student participation and meaningful involvement. At the same time, the research cannot explain how school leaders may support student voice activities in practical ways (Pautsch, 2010). However, the literature sheds light on the essential elements that are required to promote genuine student voice; these include the involvement of students in the decision-making process and collaboration between students and adults to drive change and school improvement. Seale's (2010) definition of student voice guided the interpretation of findings throughout this research, and served as a benchmark for the evaluation of the extent to which schools recognise and implement practices that foster genuine student engagement. It also informed the development of recommendations from this study's findings that would enhance student participation in education evaluation and reform, consistent with the ideals of active and empowering participation that were outlined by Hart (1992). However, school leaders must establish robust support structures that adequately prepare and guide students to embrace these roles effectively.

The literature highlights the benefits of amplifying student voice in schools, but a significant gap remains between the literature and practice. Mitra (1996) emphasises that while theoretical frameworks exist to promote student participation and empowerment, their practical application is lacking and does not show the 'how' of implementation and measurement. Several criticisms of student voice have been discussed. However, implementation of effective classroom strategies, as mentioned in the literature, provides a systematic approach, and clear guidelines based on each school's context can address all these issues and overcome the challenges that may hinder the promotion of student voice in and across schools.

There is an extensive body of literature on leadership that is relevant to adults in various fields, roles and organisations. Yet the literature related to the definitions and understanding of student or youth leadership requires expansion. The leadership styles mentioned are not used to describe student leadership, but they are essential prerequisites for the development of genuine student involvement and to foster student voice in order to promote student leadership. Robinson (2008) acknowledges the need for further research, particularly in the form of descriptive and intervention studies, to provide more direct evidence of the relationship between distributed leadership and student outcomes. Student leadership is the outcome of student voice activities. It involves the empowerment of students to initiate and lead activities that adults facilitate. After exploration of distributed, collaborative and shared leadership, I found holacracy to be a blended model of all these three. For adult leaders in different fields, including schools, it is clear that distributed, collaborative and shared leadership styles emphasise decentralisation, inclusivity and empowerment. When such leadership styles are used to develop student leadership, they align closely with the highest level of participation on Hart's Ladder (1997) as they encourage collaboration between adults and students

(Mitra, 2006). It is crucial to investigate student leadership from students' points of view. Understanding student perspectives, providing them with leadership opportunities, and moving beyond the confines of adult leadership theories can help to develop effective and engaged student leaders. This approach can benefit individual students and create vibrant and participatory school cultures (Dempster and Lizzio, 2007).

In summary, the prominent scholars who have shaped the discourse on student voice include Fielding, who advocates genuine partnerships and increased student involvement in school improvement; Mitra, who emphasises collaboration and active participation while highlighting the positive outcomes of amplifying student voice; Hart, who introduced the ladder of participation as a critical framework for analysing the depth of student involvement; and Rudduck, who stresses the importance of valuing student perspectives and soliciting pupil input in school improvement efforts. While these scholars present compelling arguments regarding empowerment of students and integration of their voices into school decision-making, the literature also uncovers persistent challenges in the achievement of authentic collaboration, such as tokenism, the co-opting of student voices, and power imbalances. These complexities require ongoing critical reflection and the establishment of robust support structures to ensure genuine engagement and collaboration among all stakeholders.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

Introduction

In this chapter are presented the research strategy, design, methods, procedures, and data collection tools that were employed to gather responses from participants to answer the research questions. It begins with details of the theoretical and methodological perspectives, along with the epistemological position of this study, based on Stake's (2015) conceptual framework. The discussion then moves to the data analysis approach that was chosen, including the ethical considerations that were observed during the research process.

Research Objectives and Questions

Research Objectives

This study was built on my MA thesis, which was titled *Fostering Student Leadership in Jordanian Public Schools: A Character Building and Life Skills Approach* and my IFS research, which was titled *Students as Partners of Change: Effect of Student Leadership on Student Achievement – A Case Study of a Middle School in Dubai*. The aim of this study was to explore and understand student voice practices that are used to foster student leadership in different contexts. This research was focused on the ways in which student voice activities enhance leadership among students. The aim was to investigate the effective strategies that were employed by school leaders at the ISE to involve students actively. This report aims to offer comprehensive insights into student voice practices, to explore the significant initiatives that ISE leaders undertake to amplify student voice and the methods through which these initiatives cultivate leadership among students.

To achieve the research aims, I explored which student voice practices stimulated student leadership by enquiring about the practical strategies that school leaders and teachers implemented to amplify student voice. Furthermore, I studied how school leaders and teachers involved students in student voice activities across different grade levels and within the school community.

Research Questions

Yin (2003) and Stake (2005) assert that case studies that are focused on 'how' and 'why' questions are particularly effective for research. Likewise, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2006) emphasise that qualitative research typically addresses 'what' and 'how' questions (p.482). Gillham (2000) argues that the creation of effective questions is the most crucial aspect of the research process (p.17). Therefore, I formulated the research questions below to ensure a probing and exploratory approach to the study.

Research Question 1 (RQ1):

What evidence is there that student voice fosters student leadership in ISE?

Sub-questions:

- How do educators and students at ISE define student voice and student leadership?
- How do students at ISE perceive student voice and student leadership?
- What kind of student leadership practices should be fostered by school leaders?
- How can student voice pave the way for student leadership?

Research Question 2 (RQ2):

What meaningful practices do school leaders in ISE implement to amplify student voice?

Sub-question:

- How can student voice practices at ISE be evaluated?

Research Question 3 (RQ3):

Why should school leaders foster and support student voice and student leadership at ISE?

Research Approach, Design, Methods and Procedures

Research Approach

Using Stake's (1995, 2005) qualitative case study approach, I used an interpretive epistemology to understand the role of student voice in the cultivation of student leadership in schools. My decision to use Stake (2005) rather than Yin (2009) as the methodologist to follow was based on my combined consideration of the intent of the research and my philosophical orientation, as Stake (2005) presented a less structured, 'flexible' approach to case study than did Yin (2009). Moreover, Stake's approach has been situated within a constructivist framework, whereas Yin's research has been located within the postpositivist paradigm (Boblin et al., 2013). The flexible approach that Stake (2005) suggests enabled me as a researcher to interact with the participants to know how they defined student voice and the practices they used to boost student voice in the school. The intention of this research was not to uncover absolute truths, but to construct knowledge based on the participants' diverse perceptions, which were gathered throughout the data collection, analysis and writing processes. This method aligned the qualitative strategy of the study with the naturalistic paradigm (Boblin et al., 2013), in which knowledge is considered to continue to evolve and be built during all stages of the research, from the initial data gathering through the analysis phase and into the final writing-up of the findings. The aim was to develop an understanding that was grounded in the varied perspectives provided by the participants rather than to seek a single definitive truth. Given (2008) states that "this type of inquiry stems from the naturalistic paradigm that situates itself opposite the positivist paradigm" (p.2).

Accordingly, the research followed “the natural settings while engaging in life experiences” (Given, 2008, p.2).

The integration of both the deductive “theoretical or top-down approach” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.83) and the inductive “bottom-up approach” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.83) was employed (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002; Rowley, 2002; Stake, 2015; Yin, 2014). Accordingly, following the inductive ‘data-driven’ methodology, the “patterns, themes, and categories of analysis” were derived from the collected data (Patton, 1987, p.150). Furthermore, I used the deductive approach by referring to existing theories and literature to evaluate the practices, the details of which were based on the collected data. Hence, as explained in Chapter 2, the reference to Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation (1992) and Mitra’s Pyramid of Student Voice (2006a) was essential to inform the implementation of this research, and they provided the primary perspective for data analysis. They also provided me with a concise list of critical distinguishing characteristics of student involvement in the activities that were found to have been effective during the interviews and conversations with the participants. For instance, to answer the first research question, referring to both Hart’s Ladder (1992) and Mitra’s Pyramid (2006a), it is essential to understand how student leadership depends on student voice. Furthermore, it was crucial to refer to Hart's Ladder in order to measure the efficiency of student involvement in the different activities and the decision-making process.

Research Design: Case Study

Case study research is the main design of flexible, qualitative research (Stake, 2005; Robson, 2011). Following the qualitative case study design enabled me to explore student voice and student leadership in-depth within the school's context (Robson, 2011). The performance of an in-depth case study enabled me to understand the benefits

of student voice activities in fostering student leadership based on the participants' experiences. One of the robust features of a case study is “its ability to examine, in-depth, a ‘case’ within a real-life context” (Yin, 2006, p.111). A single case study methodology with a qualitative and flexible approach was a suitable choice for me to collect data to answer my research questions (Gillham, 2000; Mason, 2017; Robson, 2011), as explained in Chapter 4. I explored the nature of student voice activities and leadership and “devote[d] careful attention to that case” (Yin, 2006, p.114). Yin (2003) highlights that a significant challenge in case study research is the generalisation of findings from a single case. This study, however, was not intended to make general conclusions. Instead, my focus was on providing insights that bridged the gap between theory and practice. Therefore, the findings were not intended to lead to generalisations but to offer practitioners valuable perspectives on ways to enhance student voice and leadership activities in their schools and beyond. Additionally, this research could create avenues for future studies and recommendations (Bryman, 2016; Robson, 2011).

Methods of Data Collection

A key feature of qualitative case study research is the use of several data sources (Stake, 1995). Hence, I gathered and analysed diverse data through the use of different methods to capture various perspectives from the participants; I aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of student voice and student leadership. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants, using open-ended questions, as “semi-structured interview provides the best of both worlds as far as interviewing is concerned, combining the structure of a list of issues to be covered together with the freedom to follow up points as necessary” (Thomas, 2013, p.198). The use of open-ended questions helped me to address (a) the context, (b) the reasons behind the decisions to implement student voice activities or relevant programmes/initiatives, (c) the implementation and sustainability,

and finally, (d) evaluation. To answer the research questions, data collection was completed through several methods, as listed below.

1. *Document interrogation*: before and while I conducted the interviews, I studied different documents to build a précis of the status quo of student voice and student leadership activities in the school. The documents included the DSIB inspection reports and the documents provided by the interviewees, such as policies and procedures and vision statements (Thomas, 2013).
2. *Questionnaire:* twenty-five secondary school students in Grades 8-11 filled out an open-ended questionnaire (Thomas, 2013) using Google Forms before I conducted the interviews with the participants. The open-ended questionnaire allowed the students to answer in whatever way they wished without limitations (Thomas,2013). For example, I asked the students “How do you define student voice?”, “What impact did your participation in Student Voice activities have on you as an individual?”, and “What suggestions do you have to raise Student Voice in schools?”, the questionnaire also included closed (yes or no) questions to find out if the students were involved in the school’s activities. My purpose in asking the students to complete a pre-interview questionnaire was to understand the students' views and perspectives on student voice and student leadership, how they defined student leadership and student voice, their rates of participation, and the types of activities they had undertaken. Having the pre-interview survey helped me to develop focused questions to be asked in the interviews, based on the students’ answers.
3. *Focus group interviews:* the plan was to conduct interviews with two focus groups with students from grades 9-12. However, the second focus group interview was cancelled due to the rise in the numbers of COVID-19 cases. I conducted one focus group interview with students from Grades 8-11, as group 12 students were

busy with their exams. The focus group comprised 13 students. The aim of this interview was to gather rich and in-depth data during the discussions. During the focus group discussion with the students, I observed their abilities and gained insights into their leadership skills, such as confidence and presentation.

4. *Semi-structured interviews:* six semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held, and because of the COVID-19 pandemic, during the data collection process, I conducted most of the interviews virtually using Zoom and Microsoft Teams (Robson, 2011; Thomas, 2013). The interviews took place with the participants successively, according to Table 3.1. The table indicates the purpose of each interview, as I focused the questions to be asked in each meeting according to the interviewee.
5. *Piloting*: to test the quality of the questions before they were posed to the participants and ”to get things right” (Thomas, 2013, p.215), the open-ended interview questions and questionnaires were tested on one of my critical colleagues in the field. Also, the interview questions were piloted once with each of two of the six participants, after which I modified the phrasing of several questions. Some core and sub-questions were deleted or re-phrased after the first pilot as they were vague and insufficiently clear to obtain in-depth answers.

Table 3.1 Design of the interviews that took place with the participant.

No.	Type of interview	Interviewee	Purpose
1	Semi-structured Virtual Microsoft Teams	Headteacher	To understand the role of the school leaders in amplifying student voice and fostering student leadership across the school.
2	Focus Group Face-to-Face	Students	To get their perspective about the importance of their involvement in such activities and how the activities changed their lives. Also, to gain the perspectives of the students who did not get involved in the activities and to understand why.
3	Semi-structured Virtual Microsoft Teams	Deputy Headteacher Senior Leader	To investigate the role of the school leaders in fostering student leadership. The questions were built based on the student survey to understand the different perceptions from the leaders' points of view.
4	Semi-structured Virtual Microsoft Teams	Deputy Headteacher Senior Leader	To inquire about the student voice activities and measure their effectiveness with reference to Hart's Ladder (1992).
5	Semi-structured Virtual Microsoft Teams	High School (HS) Supervisor / Teacher	To understand the role of the supervisor in organising the student voice activities and how such activities foster student leadership in the school (Grades 8-12).
6	Semi-structured Virtual Zoom	HS Teacher	To gain the teachers' input in terms of their role in nurturing student leadership and to ask about the activities that could be done inside the classes to involve their students.

Procedures

I conducted the interviews over three months. Participants were contacted through a network of professional connections. Contact with some participants was made through the school headteacher based on her recommendations to ensure it's a purposeful sample to receive the necessary information about the activities. After I had obtained verbal approval from the headteacher of the ISE, I followed up with an official email to request permission (Appendix 1) to conduct my research there. For organisational

purposes, I developed an interview schedule (Appendix 16) once I received the participants' consent and details of availability.

I developed an interview protocol for the headteacher (Appendix 9), another for teachers and leaders (Appendix 10), and another for students (Appendix 12). The interview protocols served as checklists (Robson, 2011; Thomas, 2013) as they included introductory comments, a list of headings and key questions to be asked under these headings, a set of prompts, and closing comments to be made at the end of each interview (Robson, 2011; Thomas, 2013). For accuracy with transcripts, I recorded the face-to-face and virtual interviews. Then, I used the SONIX transcription software application (Appendix 24) to transcribe the data (Robson, 2011).

Participants / Sampling

In line with the qualitative design, I collected detailed and rich data from a small group of participants to find answers to the research questions. Then, I analysed the participants' responses and perceptions. The case study involved the participants in an empirical inquiry and investigation to understand the meaningful practices of student voice, which school leaders plan and implement to foster student leadership, and how they involve students in school improvement. The sample members were relevant to the research context and provided in-depth information that helped me to answer the research questions.

Marriam (1998) explains that purposeful sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p.61). Gillham (2000) stresses the importance of using multiple sources of evidence when conducting case study research. To ensure that different perspectives were obtained, I selected participants from among a variety of stakeholders, including students, teachers, and both middle

and senior leaders. I asked for permission from the headteacher to access the school to meet the participants for research purposes (Appendix 1). I then verbally asked the participants to contribute to the research. Following that, an official invitation email (Appendix 13) was sent to them to explain the purpose of the study. Since my research was focused on understanding the practices that school leaders implemented to amplify student voice and foster student leadership, I interviewed the headteacher, two senior leaders, one middle leader, and one teacher who was the class adviser for grade 10. The aim was to gain insights into the various activities, initiatives and strategies that the school leaders used to engage students and provide them with opportunities to develop their leadership skills. The sample for this study was not limited to school leaders alone; it also included students across different grade levels to capture their perspectives on student voice and leadership within the school context. Throughout the study, the focus was not solely on the role of school leaders, but rather on identifying the specific practices, programmes and structures that the school had implemented to amplify student voice and cultivate student leadership. The interviews with the school leaders, teachers and students provided a comprehensive understanding of the range of activities offered, their effectiveness, and the impact on student engagement and leadership skills. The goal was to uncover practical insights that could guide other schools in their development of meaningful student voice initiatives and their fostering of student leadership. It was essential that I selected this purposeful sample so that I could analyse the case from multiple angles and perspectives (Gillham, 2000).

The sample for this study comprised:

- 25 students from Grades 8 -11 (aged 13-16 years);
- the headteacher of the school;
- two senior leaders;
- one middle leader; and

- one teacher.

The middle leader also taught, so she was simultaneously considered a teacher and a middle leader. The students who filled out the pre-interview questionnaires were chosen at random from students in Grades 8-11. Hence, the student sample was not limited to those involved in student voice activities; it included both boys and girls who participated in various activities and others not involved. I selected the students for the focus group discussion based on the answers provided to the pre-interview questionnaire, in order to include students who held different perceptions.

Participants' Profiles

- **Headteacher:** had joined ISE more than ten years before the study was conducted and had over 30 years of experience in education. She occupied the highest position in the organisational structure of the school.
- **Senior Leader 1 (SL1):** served as the deputy headteacher of the senior school and had been part of the school for over 20 years. Worked as a teacher and a supervisor. This leader reported directly to the headteacher.
- **Senior Leader 2 (SL2):** An experienced educational leader with over 14 years of experience in teaching, staff development, and student development. Had been working at the school for more than ten years. This leader reported directly to the headteacher.
- **Middle leader (ML):** An experienced educator who had been in the school for more than ten years. She was involved in several student-voice and student-leadership activities. She reported to SL1 on the organisational structure.
- **Teacher:** a secondary school teacher who also worked as an assistant supervisor.

Twenty-five students filled out a pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix 11). From the 25, I chose a group of 13 boys and girls for the focus group interview based on their answers to the questionnaire, to ensure that I had interviewees who would offer different perspectives. I ensured that I included students who felt that school leaders did not involve them in decision-making, alongside those who did not participate in school activities. Additionally, I included students who believed that the school involved them in the decision-making process and were engaged in student voice activities at ISE.

The students were asked to join the research using an 'opt-in consent'. The school administrator contacted them to ask whether they would like to participate. Those interested in participating completed the survey and took part in the focus group interview. To ensure that the students understood the purpose of the research, I shared with them written information about the research (Appendix 4) and a consent letter (Appendix 7). Moreover, their parents also received the consent letter (Appendix 6) so that I could gain their approval before their offspring took part in the research. All the students and their parents approved participation in the research.

To include as many student voices as possible, I sent the survey to approximately 900 students in Grades 8-11, 25 of whom filled out the survey, and 13 of whom were called for a focus group discussion afterwards.

Data Analysis

Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data were recorded and saved both during and immediately after the data collection process (Robson, 2011). Afterwards, I studied and classified the data to test whether "the evidence supports or otherwise" (Rowley, 2002, p.24) the research questions. The collected data and relevant evidence were subjected to constant comparison and interpretation to extract themes and codes (Thomas, 2013). According to the inductive analysis approach, "the patterns, themes, and categories of the analysis"

(Patton, 1987, p.150) were derived from the data. Accordingly, themes were not drawn before the data had been collected and analysed. Instead, the themes that captured significant aspects of the collected data in relation to the research questions were developed and represented (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Thematic Data Analysis

I chose thematic coding because it is among the most widely used and effective methods of qualitative data analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). The use of thematic data analysis allowed me, as a researcher, to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning within the collected qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During the coding process, I identified essential features in the data and attached labels to index them as related (King, 2004). Within the thematic analysis, the codes were developed into themes relevant to the research question. According to Clarke and Braun (2016), it is possible to use thematic analysis across a range of epistemologies and research questions because of its flexibility (Nowell et al., 2017). This flexibility is considered one of its disadvantages (Nowell et al., 2017), yet thematic analysis is instrumental in the "to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices; 'experiential' research which seeks to understand what participants' think, feel, and do (Clarke and Braun, 2016, p.297).

Moreover, it is a valuable approach in inductive studies in which researchers explore a "new terrain" (Clarke and Braun, 2016, p.298). Student voice and its relationship to student leadership can be viewed as a new terrain, as limited research has been undertaken in this area. Therefore, the adoption of a thematic analysis of the participants' perspectives would support my research in the generation of a new framework within the field. I referred to the six-phase approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006); the four phases below represent the essential steps I followed before I produced the thesis.

Phase 1: Become Familiar with the Data

The importance of this phase is identified across a range of approaches to thematic analysis. Hence, I started the data analysis process by reading the transcripts several times and following Boyatzis' advice (1998) to summarise the individual data pages. I read the data interactively many times and gained familiarity with the data set so that I became familiar with the "depth and breadth of the content" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.16). During this phase, I read the collected data critically, and noted my preliminary ideas and worked to identify emerging patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2022). At this early point, it was crucial to avoid over-analysis and interpretation to prevent me from imposing my perceptions and values on the data in order to remain true to the participants' voices and ensure the data's trustworthiness. During this stage, I examined and organised the data to determine whether the evidence answered the research questions of the case study (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Rowley, 2002). It was important to remain focused on my research questions during this stage "to avoid losing sight of [my] analytic focus and purpose" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.198).

After each scheduled session, I transcribed the interviews using SONIX transcription software (Appendix 23). Conversion of the data into written form enabled me to perform the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is important to note that this transcription process was an effective way for me to familiarise myself with the data. Additionally, Bird (2005) states that this step is "a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology" (p.227).

Phase 2: Generate codes

Once familiar with the data, I compiled an initial list of ideas. To identify possible codes for analysis, I uploaded all the transcripts into the NVivo14 software package (see

Appendix 21). Although I coded the transcripts manually for data analysis within my IFS project, in this case, my participation in data analysis workshops and completion of two NVivo14 training courses boosted my confidence to advance as a researcher and leverage such software for data analysis. This software efficiently handles large datasets and in my study, its use enabled effective cross-checking of themes. The generation of codes (Appendix 22) was essential to the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Miles and Huberman, 1994). According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), "coding generally is used to break up and segment the data into simpler, general categories and is used to expand and tease out the data" (p.30). This phase was necessary in order to produce initial codes from the data and organise my data into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). The generated codes identified features of the data that could be seen as "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p.63). Coding enabled me to improve my understanding of the data, ask questions, offer tentative answers regarding the relationships within and among the data, and delve into the data itself (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

Phase 3: Search for Themes

After I had developed the codes, I started to group similar codes to form preliminary themes that captured the most salient features of the case study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In many studies, the final themes are broader than the initial generated codes as at this point, the data are analysed interpretatively and arguments about the phenomenon under study are made in relation to the analysed data (Boyatzis, 1998). I then organised the "emerging themes into meaningful clusters", and began to "define how they relate to each other within and between these groupings" (Brook et al., 2015, p.204). This step included the creation of "hierarchical relationships, with narrower themes nested within broader ones" (Brook et al., 2015, p.204). I used NVivo14 to draw

a mind map, which included the initial codes that had been developed in the previous step (see Appendix 23).

Phase 4: Review and definition of the Themes

This phase was essential for me to draw conclusions to respond to the research questions. It is vital that the themes are revisited, with the support of sufficient evidence, in order to define the final themes that answer the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Robson, 2011). Hence, before the determination and finalisation of the themes, triangulation was essential to ensure that the themes were generated from all the data resources: i.e., that they were 'data-driven'. The use of the interviews, surveys and documents followed the inductive approach, as Patton argues that the "patterns, themes, and categories of analysis" (1987, p.150) must emerge from the collected data in order to develop a new framework to bridge the gap in the literature. In this step, I removed irrelevant themes, as they were not supported by sufficient evidence (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Rowley, 2002). Some themes were combined, while others were divided into separate themes. I ensured that there was no overlap between the themes at this stage, and I also developed sub-themes, which are explained in Chapter 4.

Triangulation

For data validity, I used data triangulation (Patton and Patton, 2002) to validate the findings (Miles et al., 2014; Rowley, 2002; Yin, 2014). I used multiple data sources (Robson, 2011): interviews, surveys, and documents such as policies and minutes of meetings. Throughout the data collection process, I kept referring to the documents and the answers from the different participants to triangulate the data. Moreover, I reviewed several documents to understand the policies and their implementation as described by the participants. Yin (2003) suggests that the use of multiple sources assists the researcher in the identification of the convergence of findings. Stake (1995) argues that researchers can also use triangulation to identify divergence. Therefore, to ensure that the data were as rich as possible and to confirm my findings, I collected data through interviews with selected participants and reviews of relevant documents to triangulate the findings throughout the data collection process (Robson, 2011).

Ethical Considerations

I took ethics into account during the research process. I followed the Research Ethical Guidelines that have been established by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and secured the required approvals for the ethics application from the Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee prior to beginning the research project (see Appendix 15). Before I initiated data collection, I registered the ethics form with the finance and data protection team and received a registration number for this research project (see Appendix 14). I conducted the research at a sister school to the school of which I am the headteacher, in the same company in Dubai. The headteacher of ISE is my colleague, and she works for the same company. There was no power relationship or authority line between the headteacher and me as a researcher. However, I clarified to the participants that my role in ISE was solely that of a researcher and was not

connected with my role in the company. Furthermore, I confirmed that their information was confidential and that their names would not be revealed.

Based on the Ethical Guidelines for Ethical Research (2018) from BERA, I sent emails to the ISE headteacher, leaders and teachers (Appendix 13) to check their willingness to participate in the research before sending them the consent form(King and Horrocks, 2010). Then, I obtained informed consent from the headteacher (Appendix 2). I offered the leaders and teachers copies of a detailed information sheet (Appendix 5) that included explanations of the purpose of the research, the process with which they would be involved, the reasons why their participation was important, the benefits of the research, and information regarding how their answers would be used and to whom it would be reported (BERA, 2018; Mercer, 2007; Robson, 2011). As for the students, they were asked in the school about their willingness to participate. Accordingly, I provided the students and their parents with information sheets that explained the research's purpose (Appendices 3 and 4). Those who agreed to participate in the research were asked to sign the student consent form (Appendix 7), and the parents were asked to sign the parent consent form (Appendix 6). I obtained all participants' signed consent (Appendix 8), in line with the BERA and Institute of Education guidelines, before I conducted the interviews and survey. I informed the participants in writing that they had the right to withdraw from the research project at any point and to choose not to answer any questions if they did not feel comfortable (BERA, 2018; Robson, 2011; Thomas, 2013).

The maintenance of a high level of confidentiality is one of the most important ethical considerations. Therefore, I employed anonymous and pseudonymous information concerning the participants and the school's name (BERA, 2018; King and Horrocks, 2010; Robson, 2011; Thomas, 2013). For privacy reasons, the collected data, including

recorded interviews and transcripts, were and continue to be stored on Google Drive, which is protected by a password. This data will be retained until the research is completed and the thesis submitted, which will occur no later than December 2025. Hard copies of the interviews, notes, and surveys are kept securely in my locker. No one has access to the collected data except for my supervisor if necessary (BERA, 2018; Thomas 2013).

Limitations

The students and teachers provided me with rich data to understand the relationship between student voice and leadership activities. However, further data collection through observation of the activities and undertaking a learning walk in the school would have benefited the research in terms of triangulation and understanding of the implementation of these activities on the ground. Completion of the pre-interview helped me to understand the context and the types of activities in which the students were involved. However, the focus group was too large at 13 students; not all students were able to express their views. Moreover, the onset of COVID-19 brought limitations, as I could not interview another group of students on another day as planned due to the rising number of cases and the move to online teaching. The interviews and sample of secondary school students did not provide any perceptions of middle school students, whom participants mentioned were included in the activities. Inviting more teachers to participate in interviews or through a survey would have gathered their input regarding the student voice activities that were held in classes. Finally, the theme of culture and family emerged as a barrier that hindered student voice at ISE. This meant that interviews of parents to understand their perspectives would have added to the data. While the data was sufficiently rich to answer the research questions, overcoming these

limitations would have provided more profound insights into ISE student voice and student leadership activities, as analysed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter is structured around the research questions presented in Chapter 3 and the concepts that were identified within the literature, drawing on all the combined data sources. The findings are discussed to answer the research questions and illustrate how they are connected to the relevant literature. The research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1:

What evidence is there that student voice fosters student leadership in ISE?

RQ2:

What meaningful practices do school leaders in ISE implement to amplify student voice?

RQ3:

Why should school leaders foster and support student voice and student leadership at ISE?

I conducted the thematic analysis through the use of NVivo 14 to interpret the data that I had collected. I mapped various responses according to themes in order to answer the research questions best, while ensuring that the findings accurately represented the participants' views. Each section includes mind maps that illustrate the themes derived from the data. This chapter will examine each theme first and then draw on supporting evidence that emerged to enhance the analysis and discussion.

The themes arose from the data analysis of five interviews with teachers and leaders, open-ended surveys completed by 25 students from Grades 8 to 11, and one focus group interview with eighteen students. For confidentiality, the names of the participants I

interviewed are not revealed in this section; instead, I refer to them by their roles. The headteacher is referred to as ‘HT’, the senior leaders as ‘SL’, and the teachers as ‘T’. Lastly, the students who participated in the survey and focus group discussion (FGD) are referred to as ‘St’. I used numbers to indicate different participants with the same role.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, I employed deductive and inductive ‘bottom-up’ approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.83).

Inductive Analysis (Data-Driven Themes)

After I followed the inductive, ‘data-driven’ approach, the themes listed below emerged from the collected data (Patton, 1987).

- The definition of student leadership and student voice.
- Relationship between student voice and student leadership.
- The school’s vision and culture.
- Student leadership styles.
- Practices that amplify student voice and foster student leadership.
- Students’ participation.
- Benefits of student voice and student leadership.

Deductive Analysis (Literature)

I used the deductive approach by referring to the existing theories and literature to evaluate the practices based on the collected data. I referred to Hart’s Ladder (1997) and Mitra’s Pyramid (2006a) to evaluate student voice and leadership activities. The following themes emerged:

- evaluation of the school’s activities; and

- building student capacity.

The Definition of Student Voice and Student Leadership

To answer research question one and to explore the relationship between student voice and student leadership, it was essential to know the participants' understanding of the two terms. The data revealed that the students, teachers, and school leaders defined the terms in different ways. The definitions of both terms overlapped and had some commonalities. In fact, on many occasions, the participants gave the same examples to describe student voice and student leadership activities. All participants believed there was a strong link between the two.

This section sheds light on the different definitions of 'student voice' and 'student leadership' that the ISE participants offered. This section also highlights the evidence that was gained from the interviewees to show that student voice fosters student leadership through exploration of the relationship between the two as perceived by the participants and whether they could see any correlation. This section also shows how the leaders at ISE evaluate the effectiveness of student voice and student leadership activities and the benefits of such activities. Finally, the emerging themes are discussed in the last part of this section.

The Definition of Student Voice at ISE

Educators and students at ISE defined student voice based on their experiences and in the context of activities across the school and in their classes as they related it to the students' interactions and activities.

While there was no unified definition at ISE, Figure 4.1 shows the themes that emerged from the participants. The participants offered various meanings of student voice: the collective opinion of students, the ability of students to express their opinions, platforms for sharing

students' views, freedom of expression, and the implementation of students' ideas or suggestions. Some participants highlighted that the student voice was necessary and was a ‘student power’. Few thought that student voice meant student leadership.

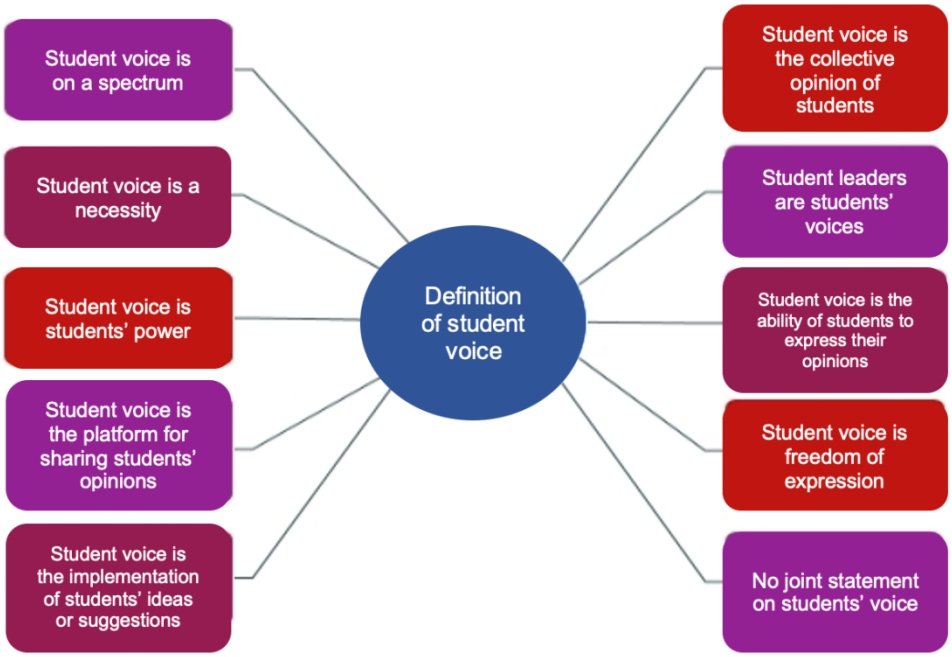


Figure 4.1 Sub-themes derived from the students on the definition of student voice.

The Perspectives of Students

Most students who participated in the open-ended survey defined student voice as ‘students' collective opinions’ or ‘the ability to express their interests and opinions’. For example, the students defined student voice as *“any expressions or requests made by students related to learning, education or otherwise”* (St3), *“Student voice means the views, opinions and perspectives of students, leading towards positive change”* (St6), *“the ability to express genuine thoughts and feelings for the betterment of the student community in school”* (St7), *“having the opportunity and platform to voice out your opinions on matters important to you and your well-being”* (St13), *“Student voice means the opinions, beliefs, perspectives, values of individual students and it’s the expression”* (St17), *“Student voice is the opinion of students”* (St20), and *“The ability of students to*

express their thoughts and beliefs to their school, and feel like they are being heard" (St25).

The above definitions indicate that students' understanding of student voice is related to the ability to express their opinions freely, which is the most common form of student voice (Mitra, 2006a).

Another definition of student voice that two respondents provided in the open-ended survey was that student leaders represented student voice. For instance, student 4 stated that student leaders were the voices of students and had to use their voice to lead a group: *"The one with student voice is called a leader. He or she has to utilise their student voice to lead a group by motivating their peers and helping them out and scolding them when necessary and praising them for good work"* (St4). Student 24 also believed that the leaders who represented the students were student voice: *"Student voice is the acknowledgement of student representation"* (St24).

Three of the students who participated in the open-ended survey stated that they considered student voice necessary. For example, student 4 stated that *"student voice is something which every student needs to have".* Similarly, student 14 stated, *"I define student voice in school as the most important aspect…"*. The definitions echo Hart's declaration that "there is a need to listen to the voices of children and youth" (1997, p.146); they indicate that listening to students is fundamental (Fielding, 2001a; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004).

Two students expressed the view that student voice was 'student power'. For instance, student 9 stated that student voice *"aims to ensure equality and helps keep the school's administration in check".* Furthermore, student 22 considered that *"student voice is the power of the students to raise awareness and change the world for the good"*. Such

perspectives resonate with the students' essential role as agents of change (Fielding, 2001; Rudduck, 2007).

The Perspectives of Educators

Teachers and leaders at ISE showed similar perspectives on how they understood student voice. For instance, the headteacher believed that student voice offered students the chance to talk about their feelings: "*Student voice is when students are able to articulate what they are experiencing"* (HD). The senior leaders said that student voice was "*… where students are allowed to share their thinking and perspective"* (SL3), and *"any opportunity given to students to participate to shape their school experiences and, to be more specific, it means to me any opportunity that is given to students to either introduce something, to carry out a programme, to offer feedback"* (SL2).

In their definitions of student voice, the teachers showed their understanding that student voice was an important part of the school's culture. For instance, the teacher highlighted that *"the student voice is at the core of the [school's] philosophy; because all our programmes in school, whether within academic programmes (or) co-curricular sports achievements"* (T1). The teacher elaborated that "*every programme, every initiative has at its heart the voice of the student, because we feel every programme, if it's designed around students, that's where we will find the most impact and long-term benefits"* (T1).

Some educators defined student voice as not only freedom of expression but also the implementation of what students say. SL1 described student voice as beyond aesthetics but focused on the daily freedom of students to impact change. However, one of the students who participated in the survey revealed that it was upsetting for students to give suggestions that were not implemented: *"But most of the time there isn't any change,*

which makes me feel a little upset and disappointed" (St2). This statement indicates that the school leaders allowed the students to express their opinions and gave them a say but sometimes did not follow up with any response to the student voice or feedback.

Moreover, such a statement suggests a disconnect in the school between the layers of Mitra's Pyramid (Mitra, 2006a): listening to students or students 'being heard' and 'collaborating with adults'. This sentiment was expressed by a few students and may indicate that student involvement is not meaningful and the process lacks dialogue. If the students do not see evidence of change after they have provided feedback, it might affect their trust and lead them to become passive instead of active learners (Fletcher, 2005).

One of the senior leaders believed that student voice fell across a range. When asked to define student voice, SL1 stated that *"…student voice is sort of a spectrum…they can be least engaged versus very engaged".* While there was no elaboration on the engagement level, such a definition resonates with Hart's Ladder (1992) and Fletcher's adaptation of it (2005). Hart (1992) places various levels of student engagement on rungs of Hart's Ladder that fall into two categories: 'non-participatory' and 'the degree of participation', while Fletcher considers that different levels of engagement create "the process of engaging students as partners" (Fletcher, 2005, p.5). Moreover, SL1 described student voice as a spectrum from "least engaged" to "very engaged". This description corresponds to the types of student voices that are highlighted by Toshalis and Nakkula (Benner et al., 2019) and that are shown in Figure 2.4. Similar to Mitra's Pyramid (2006a), the figure shows a progression through varying degrees of student involvement from 'being heard' to 'leadership'. While senior leader 1 did not mention any "spectrum" model from the literature, the statement may indicate that student engagement at ISE can move from passive to active roles, and this resonates with the

different models in the literature such as those described by Hart (1992), Fletcher (2005) and Mitra (2006 a).

When I asked the participants whether there was a unified definition of student voice at ISE, they all confirmed that there was not. For instance, senior leader 3 stated: "*There is no structured definition as of now."* Similarly, senior leader 2 said: *"I don't think we* [ISE] *have a statement of student voice."*

The students identified various aspects of student voice, from expression to advocacy. The students' responses aligned with the educators' definitions of student voice, which captured the notions of 'listening to' and 'expressing ideas and opinions freely'.

The definitions of student voice that were offered by the participants at ISE aligned with various definitions found in the literature. For example, Lambert (2003) defines student voice as "the opportunity for students to express their ideas and beliefs and to be heard" (p.56). The definitions given by ISE educators and students indicated that activities were categorised as expression, consultation, participation, activism, and leadership. These categories are similar to those in the spectrum developed by Toshalis and Nakkula (2012), which is based on Hart's Ladder (1992). Concerning Seale's (2010) definition, which was fundamental for this study, the definitions offered by the participants encapsulate the multifaceted nature of student voice activities and student engagement, and indicate that the students are empowered and encouraged to be part of the school reform and change. However, none of the participants mentioned the involvement of the students in the decision-making process at ISE in their definitions, in contrast with the definitions of student voice that are found in the literature, which indicate meaningful student involvement (Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2006 b; Whitty and Wisby, 2007). Mitra (2006

a) defines student voice as “the many ways in which youth might have the opportunity to participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (p.7). Student voice “can be understood as pupils having the opportunity to have a say in decisions in school that affect them” (Whitty and Wisby, 2007, p.18). Furthermore, the participants’ definitions were missing important reasons for schools to embrace student voice: children’s rights, active citizenship, and school improvement (Hart, 1997; Whitty and Wisby, 2007).

In conclusion, the data revealed that the study participants viewed student voice as freedom of expression and the implementation and consideration of students’ ideas and opinions. The analysis also showed that student voice was beneficial as it improved the learning environment and helped students gain life skills.

The Definition of Student Leadership at ISE

This section reports the participants’ definitions of student leadership at ISE. The participants considered a student leader to be an individual with many skills, which are shown in Figure 4.2.

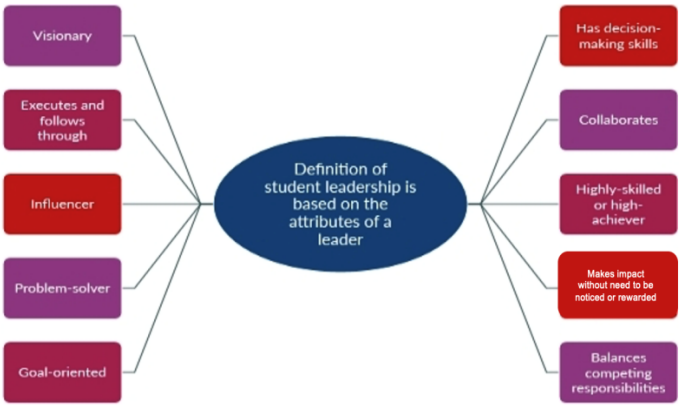


Figure 4.2 Sub-themes that emerged from definitions of student leadership.

The data collected from ISE participants illustrate a nuanced understanding of student leadership. This finding echoes Owen's (2007) assertion that leadership has no straightforward definition. At ISE, student leaders are seen as collaborators, decision-makers, problem solvers, and influencers who impact without seeking notice or reward. This aligns with Linden and Fertman's (1998) perspective that everyone has leadership potential and each can lead in different ways. In the leadership literature, as highlighted by Clark and Harrison (2018), leadership is a multifaceted field with numerous definitions; Stogdill (1974) expresses the view that definitions are as varied as the individuals who attempt them. Leadership involves influencing others and motivating collective achievement of goals, which matches the descriptions provided by Richmon and Allison (2003).

The definitions obtained from the participants throughout the research process were similar to those obtained in the MA research (Abu-Shamat, 2014). The students and educators at ISE defined student leadership as taking the initiative and making a change in school. For instance, one of the students defined student leadership as *"taking the lead and leading different initiatives that people organise and knowing how to lead, get people together"* (St1). Decision-making skills and responsibility are two talents that are attributed to a student leader. For example, one of the teachers said: "…*making the correct choice, you will exhibit a leadership quality of weighing your decisions before just jumping to conclusions, so you become more responsible and you respond as opposed to becoming more reactive and reacting to a situation"* (T1).

Problem-solving was one of the terms that the participants, especially students, commonly used to define student leadership. For instance, student 2 emphasised that student leaders find solutions and implement them: *"Student leadership also includes*

addressing the problems your peers or anyone else in the school face…but also addressing their problems, finding proper solutions, and implementing them…" (St2).

Another character attribute they mentioned was the ability to balance responsibility. Two of the participants believed that student leaders could balance competing responsibilities. Senior leader 2 gave an example of a student leader who excelled in environmental activism and had involved volunteers in four green cycle drives. Such an example reflects meaningful student involvement (Fletcher, 2005) and shows high participation in Hart's Ladder (1992).

One participant linked leadership to achievement by stating that a student leader was a high achiever or highly skilled. A teacher defined leadership by giving examples of the students' presentation skills and visibility. According to teacher 1, student leadership involves standing on podiums, addressing assemblies or events, and influencing students' skills and visibility.

> *"I think student leadership means standing on a podium [at] an assembly or at an event and saying, okay, that's a leader standing in front of me. That for me is student leadership.…So, you have two types of leaders, one who is high-impact because of visibility [and] for some, it's more a skill-based leadership"* (T1).

Personal characteristics and charisma were also highlighted when the participants defined student leadership. For instance, some participants believed that a student leader was an influencer. In the FGD, one student stated: *"I said that student leadership is…about making everyone contribute to the task"*. The headteacher believed that leaders influenced and impacted on a large scale, and one of the senior leaders believed that leaders put themselves in positions to influence people's decisions. Two of the

participants believed that a student leader was goal-oriented. For instance, senior leader 2 believed that a student leader must have a focused plan and clear goals.

Vision was considered one of the main characteristics of leadership. One participant stated that a leader is someone who possesses a vision and has an impact on others. Two participants considered a student leader to have a high emotional quotient and sympathy and to make an impact without the need for notice or reward. Teacher 1 cited an instance of students who had helped others without seeking praise:

> *"And just the other day, a child probably was having a bad day in class because they got some marks and had not scored well. And I had these three children walk up to me and say…'we've already spoken to the child', even showed that the child has eaten differently, showed that the child has had some water and gone and washed his face. 'And we've explained to him that it's just a test. It's not the end of the world. If you give him five minutes, mam, he will be all right'"* (T1).

Service leadership was a term used to define student leadership. For instance, senior leader 2 said: "*We have been moving more and more towards a service form of leadership, where the understanding is that it's not about the badge"*. Similarly, teacher 1 said: *"…that impact they have on a friend who needs the help is what for me is student leadership"*.

During the interviews, the participants gave overlapping definitions of 'student voice' and 'student leadership'; they indicated that the two were interrelated. The section below sheds light on the relationships between student voice and student leadership, as mentioned by the participants at ISE and linked to the relevant literature.

Relationship between Student Voice and Student Leadership

The participants' explanations of the relationship between student voice and student leadership became a theme that answered RQ1, which sought evidence for how student voice fostered student leadership at ISE. The participants' comments are shown in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3 Descriptions of the theme of the relationship between student voice and student leadership.

Student voice drives student leadership

The collected data and the literature findings offer compelling evidence that student voice fosters student leadership. The data shows that five participants considered that student voice drove student leadership. For example, the headteacher stated that student voice and action were essential for effective leadership and change. *"I believe that when there are avenues for student voice to be expressed and heard and actioned, that has the maximum impact on student leadership…it's an essential component to have for effective leadership"* (HT). Moreover, one of the senior leaders expressed the view that "*…through student voice, we develop student leadership"* (SL3). This link, as mentioned by the participants, resonates with 'building capacity for leadership', which is the top section of the three fundamental forms of student voice that make up Mitra's Pyramid (2006 a, p.7) (Figure 2.3).

Findings in the literature further support the connection between student voice and effective leadership; Mitra (2004) illustrates that strengthened student voice can enhance

youth development and leadership skills. Fielding (2001) and Cook-Sather (2006) explore how empowerment of student voice transforms students into active leaders and agents of change. Rudduck and Flutter (2004) highlight the role of student voice in school improvement, as it stimulates responsibility and leadership. These perceptions show that student voice plays a crucial role in fostering student leadership, and this finding aligns with practical and theoretical educational leadership concepts.

Student Voice is Expression, while Student Leadership is Implementation

Three students who participated in the FGD believed that student voice was the expression of students' views and perspectives, while student leadership was the implementation. Student 4 said they considered that student leadership involved being the first to act, while student voice involved formulating plans and raising issues. *"I think that student leadership is kind of being the first to take the initiative and being the first to raise the concern and make a change about that student voice…But student voice is raising that concern or that idea, (it) doesn't necessarily mean making a change"* (St4). Similarly, student 1 in the FGD stated: *"I want to use two words after everyone said, student voice is about addressing your problems [taking actions based on the students' views or feedback], but student leadership is about implementing them. So, I just want you to use those two words [addressing and implementing]"* (St1). These statements resonate with rung eight of Hart's Ladder: 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults' (Hart, 1992). At this level of participation, students initiate projects and ideas and involve adults as partners in the decision-making process.

Student Voice and Student Leadership are Interconnected

Four of the participants mentioned the interconnection of the two features. One of the teachers stated that student voice and leadership were two sides of a coin, and wisdom was the glue that held them together: "*Because when you have the wisdom to decide*

between right and wrong, you will make the correct choice. And by making the correct choice, you will exhibit a leadership quality of weighing your decisions" (T1). One of the senior leaders also believed that student leadership and voice were *"indirectly … interconnected"* (SL3), while another said that student voice and leadership went *"side by side"* (SL2). The headteacher regarded student voice and leadership as a *"direct correlation"*. One of the teachers stated that *"the student voice is through a leadership module"* when referring to the council system at ISE.

The data reveals that student voice and leadership are connected; while some participants indicated that student voice was essential to the development of student leadership, others considered them the same. The collected data at ISE indicate strong evidence that student voice fosters student leadership.

The School's Vision and Culture

Some participants indicated that student voice and student leadership practices were embedded in the school's policy and part of the school's philosophy. For instance, one of the senior leaders stated: *"School leadership and vision are crucial for leveraging student voice and ensuring school's [functions] effectively"* (SL1). Similarly, another participant believed that student voice was *"the core of the [school's] philosophy"* (T1). However, this was not evident in the school's vision and mission statements. For instance, the school's vision, the 'what', which is stated as 'Inspiring children to be positive changemakers,' is straightforward but is not reflected in the mission statement, the 'how', to show how the school leaders at ISE develop student leaders and work with the children to make them changemakers. The mission statement states that the school "aims to develop vibrant and exemplary students who are nurtured to achieve their optimal potential and work respectfully towards creating a more peaceful world…(It) provides opportunities for a holistic and all-inclusive student-focused learning

environment with an overarching emphasis on building mature and sensitive young people, with the cultural intelligence to make a positive difference in local and global communities". The school's vision and mission statements lack a focus on student voice. However, the school clearly defines student leadership, and several systems and activities are implemented to amplify student voice, which fosters student leadership. It was clear during the interviews that nearly all participants were aware of activities that occurred in the school, including standard practices such as the use of the holacracy model, the council system, and the school's culture. They spoke a common language, which indicated that leadership practices were embedded in the school's culture.

The data suggests that the school's leaders successfully create a positive culture to encourage the students to express their ideas and views. For example, **'freedom of expression'** was another term used by the participants as a fundamental pillar of the school's culture. The headteacher highlighted that freedom of expression at ISE promoted intellectual growth and critical thinking. The data reveals that the students can express their thoughts and opinions and engage in thoughtful discussions such as an activity named Challenge-based Learning (CBL) and debates. They can exchange ideas with the teachers and leaders through the systems explained in the section below. The leaders and teachers in the school emphasised the importance of freedom of expression as it stimulates creativity, cultivates analytical skills, and fosters an environment of collaboration, learning and growth. Freedom of expression at ISE enables every student's voice to be heard regardless of grade level. For instance, one of the teachers confirmed that *"they [students] express what they want to express individually. I think that is the USP [unique selling point] of the school, I should say"* (T1). One of the students said: *"My school gives everyone a voice, and everyone can give suggestions, feedback, and opinions to their heart's content"* (St4).

Some participants indicated that the school's leaders consistently prioritised seeking feedback from students, and they perceived this issue as deeply embedded in the school's culture. For example, one of the senior leaders stated: *"There is a consistent culture of seeking feedback from students"* (SL2). Some participants added that acting upon the suggestions and recommendations provided by students regarding desired changes within the school was a strong practice that amplified the student voice. For example, senior leader 3 highlighted the importance of incorporating student input into decision-making processes, whether related to parent groups or changes in the school's structure. The participants indicated that this approach enabled students to have their voices heard and valued.

The school follows an **'open-door policy'** to cultivate a culture that encourages student voice practices so that students at ISE feel empowered. Some participants said that the open-door policy had enhanced student voice in the school. For instance, one of the senior leaders confirmed: "*We have an open-door policy in the school where students - starting from the principal to the vice principal*[8] *to the supervisor- can come and share whatever they want..."* (SL3). Furthermore, the students noted that the school had systems in place to raise their issues and share their feedback with the teachers and leaders of the school. In the open-ended survey, seven students said they felt heard because of the open-door policy. For example, one of the students stated: *"I can always approach them in case of any problem I have, and they listen to me for any suggestions I want to give"* (St1). One of the participants also revealed that he considered he could talk openly to anyone due to student voice, which was an important life skill to develop.

[8] At ISE, students and educators use the terms 'Principal' and 'Vice Principal' rather than 'Headteacher' and 'Deputy Headteacher'.

In addition, student 9 stated that the school had allowed him to express his opinions without being judged: *"My school provides me with the freedom to voice my opinions and not be judged for them"*.

It is evident from this data that the children at ISE have the right to express their thoughts and opinions freely (Hart, 1997) and that the school is providing the students with their rights in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which guarantees freedom of expression for children through Articles 12, 13 and 14 (treaties.un.org, 1989). Furthermore, the use of '**freedom of expression**' as an important pillar to amplify student voice reflects Lambert's definition of student voice as "the opportunity for students to express their ideas and beliefs and to be heard" (2003, p.56). The participants did not mention the term 'student consultation' per se. Instead, they used the phrases 'open-door policy', 'feedback' and 'survey' as examples of student voice activities. The mentioned examples reflect the real meaning of this important student voice activity (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Goździk-Ormel, 2008) in terms of asking the students to propose solutions for the problems they face in school (Mitra, 2004). Moreover, the examples indicate that students at ISE are given the opportunity "to have a say in decisions in school that affect them" (Whitty and Wisby, 2007, p.18).

Student Leadership Styles at ISE

Distributed Leadership and Holacracy Model

The participants highlighted that ISE leaders had changed the leadership style from a traditional (top-down) 'hierarchical leadership' to a 'distributed leadership'. Moreover, the headteacher explained that they had adopted a 'holacracy' management model to distribute the power among the students throughout the school instead of having one or two student leaders. The school leaders removed the head boy and head girl positions

from the structure in a significant paradigm shift; the headteacher highlighted that they had replaced the traditional student leadership model for Grades 8, 11 and 12 with the holacracy model. *“So now we're following the holacracy model where we don't have a head boy, we don't have a head girl, we don't have any house captains, no prefix [titels]. Instead of that, we've got councils…”* (HT). One of the teachers confirmed the change: “*We moved from a head-boy-head girl system to a more distributed leadership system because [it] gives more students the opportunity and is invested in the school”* (T1). The leaders noticed that the elections of the head boy and girl were not genuine and the students asked for a change in the structure. One of the senior leaders said: *“They [the students] found that the [election] process was getting too political…That process was getting very ugly, so teachers and the students felt that that kind of ugly political angle has no place in a school, and they wanted to do away with that”* (SL1). It is worth noting that the students felt positive about this change; for example, one student highlighted: *“So for the head-boy-head girl system, we had one leader for the entire school, so two leaders [one boy and one girl] for the entire school and two leaders [one boy and one girl] for each house. But this wasn't very good with the management, so it was changed to [the council system]”* (St7-FGD).

Also, during the FGD, student 9 confirmed that the move from hierarchical to distributed leadership was very effective because it involved everyone in the class. For example, five students who filled out the open-ended survey felt heard because of decentralised leadership. Student 5 stated that decentralised leadership involved the class council system, through which students raise concerns to the school management. With reference to the literature, school councils comprise one or two representatives of the student body from each grade across the school (Klein, 2003; Lambert, 2003; Trafford, 2003). However, this is a disadvantage of the school council system, because a small

number of students take part (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). However, at ISE, the change in the leadership style from hierarchical to distributed leadership has increased the students' involvement and "enough student representatives [have been selected] to have an authentic voice" (Lambert, 2003, p.57).

ISE's adoption of a distributed leadership model, which is akin to holacracy, demonstrates how schools can implement these theories to engage students in meaningful leadership roles, and in so doing, challenge the criticism regarding limited student participation. This approach resonates with Dempster and Lizzio's (2007) advocacy of student-centred leadership models, which emphasise that student perspectives must be understood to foster leadership.

The holacracy model is not commonly used in schools. Yet the adoption of such an innovative model at ISE has helped the school leaders to involve more students than before in student voice activities and to give more students opportunities to be involved in leadership roles without having specific titles.

In the literature, holacracy is defined as "a form of self-management that confers decision power on fluid teams, or 'circles', and roles rather than individuals" (Bernstein et al., 2016, p.39). The headteacher of ISE stated that the school's council system had been developed to ensure that it was aligned with the holacracy model; the councils were the circles and the teams worked together in collaboration instead of through hierarchical or power relationships. Through use of this innovative model, the school strives to offer every student an equal chance to cultivate their leadership skills. It provides them with the necessary resources, support and opportunities to drive ideas that positively influence the school's community, based on their interest and choices. The participants

mentioned the council system as an example of student leadership and student voice activities, as explained in the section below.

Servant Leadership

One of the participants indicated that servant leadership was a form of student leadership that had been adopted at ISE. For instance, one of the senior leaders stated: *"We have been moving more and more towards a service form of leadership, where the understanding is that it's not about the badge. It's about being passionate about what you do and doing for that [passion/drive]"* (SL1). While other participants did not mention this form of leadership, the language that the students used during the interviews suggested that the students were being selected to serve the ISE community.

The data resonates with the literature on servant leadership as it emphasises service and passion over authority, which aligns with Greenleaf's foundational concept that leadership should prioritise the growth and well-being of others (Greenleaf, 1970). The principles of servant leadership, as discussed by Coetzer et al. (2017), support an environment in which students and teachers collaborate, thereby fostering a nurturing school community. The senior leaders' focus on being passionate about actions rather than status reflects key servant leadership traits such as empathy, stewardship, and commitment to community growth, as highlighted by scholars such as Spears (1995) and Northouse (2018). This alignment suggests that the leadership approach at ISE fosters a supportive and motivated environment that is consistent with the positive organisational outcomes associated with servant leadership in academic studies.

Building Student Leadership Capacity

Three participants believed that student-to-student assistance programmes were a practice that strengthened student voice. Senior leader 1 stated that the buddy system

assisted peers across age groups with their academic studies. *"So, for example, the buddy system, they can help peers at different age groups with their academic [standing]"* (SL1). One of the students also spoke about the opportunities that the school gave to students to assist peers: *"…Ms [A] had actually asked us to come up with a solution, too. And we actually had an opportunity to get trained as, like, a teen-to-teen first-aid responder…"* (St3). Another student believed that students had the opportunity to assist others through the Pledge Officer on Duty (POD) system: *"In our school, we have pledge officers on duty, also known as pods. Their role is to help the younger students undertake activities and develop their leadership skills"* (St16). All 25 students (100%) who filled out the open-ended survey affirmed that their school offered them the opportunity to develop their leadership skills.

Some participants expressed their opinion that training was a school practice that built student voice. The headteacher stated that leaders were trained: *"Student competencies are very clearly defined. Student leadership competencies are clearly defined…"*. One focus group discussant said that the school system prioritised the cultivation of student leaders through constant support and encouragement. *"We have a very nice system where our seniors are the first people we can go to.... they helped me build on my concerns and initiate something in school. And so even teachers were very supportive…"* (St5).

According to senior leader 2, *"The school gives support by sharing its platform…"*. Some participants also expressed their view that support from the school amplified student voice. Student 24 said that the school was *"mentoring the junior".* The mentoring of juniors develops student leadership skills. Other than student-to-student support, the participants' examples indicated strong collaboration between the students and teachers

('adults'), which positions such engagement at the highest rungs of Hart's Ladder (1992). A high degree of student participation leads to building of the students' capacity and enables them to initiate several activities, as mentioned in the following section.

Practices that Amplify Student Voice and Foster Student Leadership

To answer RQ2, the participants highlighted various activities and practices that the school leaders implement to nurture student voice and build leadership at ISE. In this section, light is shone on the activities that the participants mentioned the most as examples of student voice and leadership activities. Those activities that the participants mentioned most frequently during the interviews, FGD, and open-ended survey are listed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Student voice and student leadership activities at ISE.

Student voice Activities	Student leadership Activities
Council system	Council system
Class council system	Class council system
Pledge officer on duty (POD) system	POD system
House system	House system
Student initiatives	Student-led activities
Class group activities	Group activities
Circle time	Project Prism
Surveys	Challenge-based learning (CBL) project
	Assemblies
	Extracurricular activities

Figure 4.4 presents the everyday activities that the participants mentioned under the two categories, student voice and student leadership activities. Of the 12 activities, half are common examples.

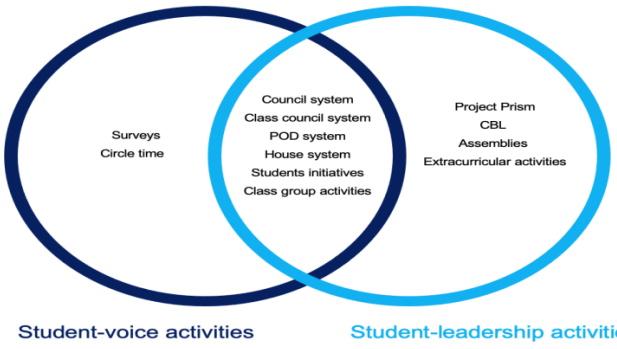


Figure 4.4 Venn diagram shows which of the mentioned activities are common to both categories.

This data indicates that student voice cultivates student leadership, and that most activities fall into both categories.

According to the collected data, the activities revealed by the participants are mentioned according to their nature in the following sub-themes:

- the council system;
- the house and POD systems;
- the class council system;
- circle time;
- surveys;
- student-led initiatives and activities;
- CBL and the Prism Project;
- classroom activities; and
- extracurricular and school's activities.

Moreover, the data revealed an important sub-theme: student participation.

The Council System

All the participants had the same view: that the council system at ISE was a fundamental student voice activity that fostered student leadership. As explained by the headteacher, the introduction of the council system based on a distributed leadership style and the holacracy model has increased the number of student leaders from **eight** to **96 students**

across the school. The school established the council system in 2015-2016 based on several sessions between members of the senior leadership team (SLT) and all the grade 11 students, as the students requested expansion of the activities of the student leadership body in the school. The students identified 12 councils that they considered useful according to their needs. The council structure was developed further in 2017-2018. Figure 4.5 illustrates the hierarchical structure, depicting how students report to the teacher member, and how the teacher in turn reports to the senior leader.

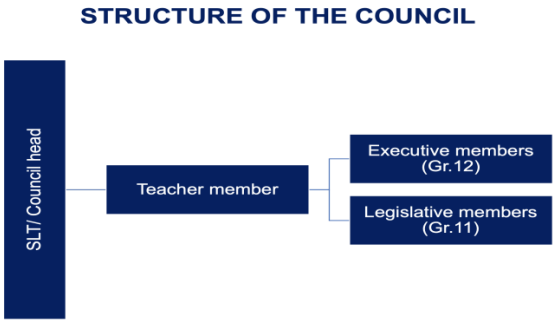


Figure 4.5 Council structure, academic year 2015-2016, at ISE.

On the other hand, Figure 4.6 illustrates the updated council structure, demonstrating that the school has shifted from a hierarchical model to a holacracy and distributed leadership model, and the council head is a student; instead of the senior leader.

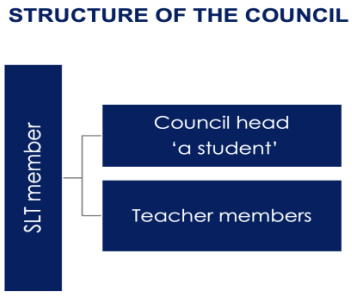


Figure 4.6 Council structure, academic year 2017-2018, at ISE.

The 12 councils, as listed by the senior leaders and teachers, cover various areas such as academics, arts, environment, business, and wellness, as shown in Figure 4.7.

Figure 4.7 The 12 councils at ISE covering various areas.

The council head in the structure is a student from grade 11 or 12; each council has an SLT member and teachers working with the students in collaboration. The team has removed the title 'council head' to adopt the holacracy model and to involve more students. One of the senior leaders explained: *"Each student is given a choice in [grade] 11 and 12, in grade five, grade eight. So, at each key stage of the school, the students will choose which council they want to be a member of, and they have to do the work of that particular council"* (SL1).

The council leads the whole school events. The senior leaders including the headteacher argued that this structure was more effective than having a head-boy or head girl. One of the senior leaders confirmed that *"we did not have any leaders in that council. So, there is no council head; there is no council leader"* (SL1). This statement suggests that leadership is not centralised or embodied in a single student. The headteacher highlighted that the main reason for changing the structure was to empower more students and to expand it beyond a small number of students. Moreover, the head boy

and head girl did not feel that they had the authority to do everything, and that this idea may have impacted other students negatively, as stated previously.

The collected data showed that the leaders further developed the council system by introducing a new role called POD in 2021-2022 to strengthen the council's structure and ensure effective implementation of distributed leadership. One of the students explained in the open-response survey that the school had houses, councils, and a POD leader and that this addition increased student representation and voice opportunities. *"(We have a) leader known as (POD) in each council; this has helped to increase [the number of]student representatives and student voice opportunities as opposed to the traditional head-boy and head girl approach"* (St3).

No evidence showed the purpose of the councils; instead, the participants provided me with a slide-show document that included a 'constitution', which contained the following points:

- all council members will contribute productively to ensure that specific targets are set and met within the stipulated time;
- all council members will work cohesively as a unit to ensure that targets are achieved;
- all council members will attend all meetings. Requests for absence will be considered only on a case-by-case basis;
- at all times, all council members will conduct themselves with the highest standards of integrity and commitment; and
- in the case of any dispute, the principal, vice-principal, teacher-in-charge and council head will convene to address the issue.

In another document, dated 2015-2016 and labelled 'presentation', under the same title 'constitution' there is mention of the objectives of the student council:

> *"The objectives of the Student Council, roles & responsibilities: a general outline of rules applied to streamline the functions of all student councils; principles under which the student council body, in general, will be governed / procedures of the council. Some common ones (Core) to come from SLT".*

According to the data, each council is expected to prepare council objectives, the council's mission statement, key events for the first two terms, and meeting minutes. The council system at ISE seems to have a role in teaching and learning, curriculum content and assessment (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Mitra, 2008; Rudduck, 2007). The data also indicates that the students are expected to propose solutions to school needs or to suggest improvements for school-related concerns, and thus to play an active part in the decision-making process (Goździk-Ormel, 2008; Mitra, 2018).

While student councils and parliaments are some of the foremost student voice activities in schools (Klein et al., 2003; Trafford, 2003), the evidence that the participants shared did not show how the ISE students were involved in the decision-making process. Furthermore, the voting or election process was unclear, as the students were welcome to join the council through a link. No criteria were shared to guide the selection process, as Lambert (2003) suggests. It was evident from the interviews and student surveys that the student councils in ISE play a vital role in nurturing essential skills for the council members, such as problem-solving, planning and organisational skills (Klein et al., 2003; Trafford, 2003). Moreover, the data indicates that the council system at ISE involves students in various matters related to education, teaching and learning, and curriculum, which resonates with the findings of Flutter and Rudduck (2004). The council system that the ISE leaders have introduced seems innovative and less traditional than the usual student council that Flutter and Rudduck (2004) describe. No evidence was offered that this system provided "the key principles of citizenship and democratic system" (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.62), but the student voice at ISE seems to play a strong role,

which contrasts with Lambert's statement that "student voices have not traditionally been a strong presence" (2003, p.57). The data indicates that the school leaders at ISE have prepared the students to participate in building.

The House System and the POD

There are four houses across the school: Aquila, Cygnus, Orion and Pegasus. Each house occurs in two forms, one for boys and one for girls, making eight in total. Each student across the school belongs to a house. Each house has one senior leader and one teacher in charge. The school appoints housemasters, who are teachers, to supervise the houses and to guide the process with assistance from the SLT. There are eight housemasters, four male teachers who care for the boys and four female teachers who care for the girls.

The house system is supported by a dedicated council to become the 13th council when students from grades 5, 8, and 12 are part of what is called "the house changemaker council". This structure has more students compared to the one mentioned in the above section. Each council has a student POD chosen by the housemasters and the house changemaker seniors, as shown in Figure 4.8.

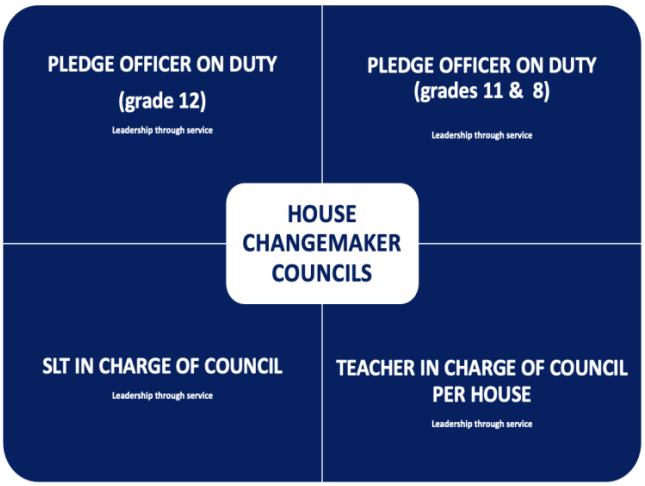


Figure 4.8 House Changemaker Councils

Students can opt to be PODs for a particular council based on their interests. Interested students must write to the housemasters (teachers) and present in front of their house members (students). This is followed by voting. The housemaster and the council head make the final decision. For instance, one student stated: *"… for PODs, you could again apply for a specific POD, like I applied for debating in MUN [Model United Nations]"* (St2). For example, the Sports Council has eight PODs (four for the boys and four for the girls). So, if a sports day is to be organised, the eight PODs and Sports Council members will lead the activity. The house system handles house-related activities such as line inter-house debate, football, etc.

House meetings are held twice a month. At the meetings, the PODs talk to the students and share the strategies and action plans for that house. The PODs are in charge of implementing the action plans in their respective houses. As stated in the documents, the PODs take the pledge on 'Pledge Day'. The role of the PODs is to participate actively in all House Changemaker Council activities. Grades 12, 11 and 8 students are called separately to take part in whole school initiatives.

Class Council

In addition to the council system structure mentioned above, there is a 'class council' system at ISE in which every class from grade 1 to grade 12 has two parent and two student representatives to form the class council members. The headteacher explained that the class council meet every month with the class teacher in every grade to discuss the concerns in the specific class, and the students take the meeting minutes. The participants stated that the class council was another effective way to amplify the student voice at the class level, as it involved all the students in the class. The teacher who was also a senior leader stated that the council members discussed the structural and procedural issues, *"starting from the fan, the door, the window, etc., to apportion completion assessment, plans for the future, etc."* (SL1). Furthermore, student 9

explained in the FGD: *"If our class has any issues, problems, suggestions, complaints, or anything, they can go to the class council members and tell them about their problems. Those students will bring it up in that meeting, but it can be addressed by parents and teachers".* The students further explained that the school worked on solving the problems. For instance, one of the students explained: *"Our school implements a class council system…that informs them about any issues and problems the students are facing, allowing us to raise our concerns up to the highest level of the school management system"* (St5). One of the students said that students' challenges were addressed in the class council: *"…as the student council member, the problems faced by other students are brought into the picture and are worked on with appropriate solutions"* (St6). Similarly, another student stated that if they were struggling with any aspect of school, they were provided with help: *"If we are struggling in any way, socially, mentally, physically, emotionally and in terms of studies, then we are aided in the best possible way"* (St8).

The agenda and minutes of the class council meetings are not limited to operation topics. Academic matters are discussed in the presence of the parent and teacher representatives; an example is the challenges that students face with the Arabic language, as mentioned in the minutes of the meeting: *"Instructions are not clear, and students are not focused during teaching and learning"*. The students mentioned in this particular meeting that they struggled to complete the assigned homework during the summative exams.

The class council system at ISE is a good example of a vibrant platform that efficiently presents the models of genuine participation of Hart's Ladder (1992). The system is structured to embrace the idea of students being active contributors to their educational

experience rather than passive recipients of adult-dictated directives. It gives children a voice, allowing them to express their concerns, share their unique perspectives, and suggest improvements in a safe and respectful environment. The system's effectiveness lies in its cultivation of a sense of ownership among students towards their learning environment, thereby promoting self-confidence, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

Moreover, the collaborative nature of the class council system aligns with the higher rungs of Hart's Ladder, in which children are not only encouraged to participate but also involved in decision-making processes. This is a significant departure from traditional class structures in which decisions are typically adult-driven. The system allows students to work and collaborate with adults, and this nurtures a sense of responsibility, accountability, and mutual respect. It demonstrates an environment in which students' voices are not just heard but valued, their contributions are acknowledged and recognised, and their participation is not just permitted but encouraged. This system, therefore, represents the essence of Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation, paving the way for enhanced student engagement, enriched learning experiences, and the overall development of students into responsible and participatory citizens.

Circle Time

'Circle time' is an adult-initiated activity, but the student voice is heard during the interaction between the students in the class. Three interviewees, three respondents to the open-ended survey, and four students in the FGD expressed their opinions that circle time was one of the ways in which the school leaders hear students at ISE. One of the students highlighted that *"during circle time, you are free to tell your thoughts and concerns about the school"* (St14). The participants explained that circle time was introduced as part of restorative practice during the pandemic. However, after evaluation,

they found that circle time was a successful platform, as the nature of the activity encouraged all the students to participate, express their thoughts freely, and voice different issues. Circle time is a mandatory activity that occurs once a week for one period (40 minutes) in every class across the school, and all the students in the same class are involved. Such student voice activity resonates with the kinds of class meetings that Lickona (1991) presents. The purpose of circle time when it was introduced was to create a "safe environment for the students to share their points of view with others" (Lickona, 1991, p.109) about their well-being during the pandemic. This is similar to 'talking circles', in which the purpose of the circles is not to reach a decision or consensus. At a later stage, the purpose of circle time changed so that it became considered a 'class meeting' that "provides an experience of democracy, making students fully partners in creating the best possible classroom" (Lickona, 1991, p.147). To ensure consistency, the school leaders assigned a small team of teachers trained in restorative practice, which included the school's counsellors. The counsellor sends a script every week to the circle time meeting, including questions and answers. The team developed a standard format that the class teachers were required to follow; during the circle, what emerges is organic and genuine. The participants confirmed that circle time was increasingly effective as it provided a forum where students could express their thoughts freely and created a decision-making community within each classroom (Lickona, 1991). The students feel that their thoughts are valued and that the circles help to develop communication and listening skills.

Circle time at ISE seems to be a good example of a student voice platform in which the students are consulted and informed, as presented on level 5 of Hart's Ladder (1992). However, no evidence was provided by the participants to show that the students were being consulted and informed during circle time. The shared script was about the students' well-being and connecting with the students.

Surveys

Surveys are considered a form of student voice activity. The findings of this study indicate that surveys are considered a tool through which the students have input to inform decisions made by the school leaders. The school leaders, students and teachers confirmed that surveys were conducted regularly on different matters. For example, the council system evolved as a response to the students' feedback provided through one of the surveys. The headteacher explained that they conducted the surveys if there was an issue on which they needed feedback, and they might conduct a survey immediately. Students are used to these surveys, which might comprise two, three, five or ten questions. The surveys are the most efficient way to get students' input quickly before a new policy or system change is implemented. The students who took part in the FGD explained that the surveys were conducted in school to learn about their experiences, what changes they would like to see, and what problems they faced in school. Based on the surveys, the students confirmed that the supervisor or leaders would come back to them with a suitable solution or ask them to find a solution, which also helped the survey. Seven students who filled out the open-ended survey and three of the focus group discussants said they felt heard because the school consistently took feedback and suggestions. One of the students stated, *"we also constantly do feedback surveys…"* (St8). Similarly, another student stated that *"we've received quite some surveys…we see surveys on how our experience is in school, what changes we want and what problems we are facing, and probably feedback, which also helps..."* (St10).

One senior leader explained that the school conducted different types of surveys, including teaching and learning. This survey is conducted termly so that the students can give their opinions about teaching and learning. They also conduct surveys about the school's timings and extended school days. Sometimes, they survey a specific group of

students rather than the whole school and ask them how they feel about a certain plan or decision. The school tries to implement the decision to the best of its ability. The students mentioned some examples in which they felt that their suggestions on the survey had been translated into action, such as the exam timetable, change to the school uniform policy and dress code, and change to the assessment policy.

Conducting surveys at ISE seems to be a good example of genuine student participation, as Hart presented in the Ladder of Children's Participation (1992). The data indicates that the students understand the process and the reasons behind conducting the surveys. As a result, the school leaders treat the students' opinions seriously and they are considered before the leaders decide on the next move. This is an example of 'consulted and informed', which falls at level 5 of the degrees of participation on Hart's Ladder.

Students as Researchers

The participants mentioned two important examples of meaningful student involvement activities: the CBL programme and the PRISM project. These projects are mandatory for all students in middle and secondary schools as they are incorporated into the curriculum. CBL is assigned to middle school students (Grades 6-8), and the PRISM project is mandated for grades 11 and 12. The participants stated that both projects were systematically conducted and annually celebrated. All the participants affirmed that such activities were essential to amplify student voice and foster student leadership. The students are asked to research to solve a problem not limited to a school problem; it may be a specific problem that occurs around the world. The students explained that CBL was the first step before undertaking the PRISM project, as it prepared them to become critical thinkers, researchers and problem solvers. In CBL, the students identify a 'driving

question' and define potential solutions. Then, they develop a model to be presented to the supervisors or senior leadership members. For instance, one of the students mentioned an example of CBL research: *"When I was in grade 7, we had this idea about changing the canteen, and it was kind of implemented because they liked [the] solution…and then they also released research about it. They told us to research how other schools are functioning regarding the canteen, although it's not a very big problem canteen, but the research part of it is there in our school"* (St5).

Project prism is more advanced; as described by the students, it is 'the second stage' after CBL. The students are asked to present a research paper colloquium in the second term of the school year. The students must work on their ideas and refer to the research to support their views and solutions. Then, they must present them in a special event to a panel that includes the senior leaders. The top-rated research studies are published in official magazines. The school provided me with the names of three students who had succeeded in publishing their research studies in official journals: the *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology* and the *International Journal of Novel Research and Development.* The project details are listed in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Details of the research studies that the students at ISE published in international journals.

Title	Author	Journal Details	Status	Presentation
Studies on the Mechanism and Impacts of Placebo Effect: Illness and Interpersonal Healing	B.D.	*International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, Vol 17, issue 12, pp 1836-1840, December 2022	Published	Paper presented at an international conference entitled "Recent Trends in Engineering, Science and Technology" on 17th October 2022
Effects of Gamification on Academic Task Completion Rates of Adolescents	A.R.	*International Journal of Novel Research and Development*, Vol 8, Issue 4, pp. d235-241, April 2023	Published	
Veritas AI: CIFAR-10 Image Classification	A.A.	*International Journal of Novel Research and Development*, Vol 8, Issue 10, pp.c50-54, October 2023	Published	

The CBL and Prism projects are good examples of meaningful student involvement. They are closely linked to the research conducted by Fielding (2001), Fletcher (2005)

and Hart (1992). The activities are one example of Fielding's (2001) four methods of participation and student voice, in which the students are positioned as fully independent researchers. Fielding (2001) emphasises the importance of engaging students in research roles, as they are enabled to explore and inquire actively. Similarly, Fletcher (2005) lists 'students as researchers' as one example of meaningful student involvement. Fletcher's work on student leadership aligns with the concept of students as researchers, as it empowers them to lead investigations and make informed decisions, thereby fostering a deep engagement with the subject matter. Hart's Ladder further contextualises this by highlighting the transition from passive learning to active participation and co-investigation, in which students collaborate with educators as equals. These frameworks collectively underscore the transformative potential of involving students as researchers; they promote not only academic learning but also critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are essential for real-world applications.

Student-led Initiatives

The students confirmed that the school empowered students to conduct student-led initiatives. For instance, one student stated: *"Our school allows each and every student to start initiatives and lead them"* (St9). Similarly, another student confirmed that *"everyone, at least once in their lifetime…they're part of the initiative or they're starting…"* (St8).

A senior leader shared with me an interesting document which showed an example of student leadership opportunities. The document showed that the students led activities such as debate club, life skills, physics club, political club, and the medical society. The activities are led by grade 11 and 12 students, but the middle school students (grades 6-8) participate in the activities. Another example of a student-led activity is the 'sports carnival', which is organised and led by grade-11 students with the Sports Council. The

participants in this case were from Grades 6 to 8. The teacher confirmed that the staff did not interfere in the planning; they approved the initiative, and the students planned and executed the whole event. The initiatives mentioned by teachers and students indicate that the school adopts a genuine participation model, and that the students are allowed to work at the highest level of Hart's Ladder (1992): 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults' (p.41). The students confirmed that the teachers empowered them and asked them to develop a solid plan. Then, the students executed the plan as the teachers trusted the students and encouraged them to take leadership responsibilities.

The student-led activities at ISE seem to lie on a spectrum. Some of the activities include direct projects, and school-wide activities are sometimes initiated by the adults, while in other cases, the activities are initiated solely by the students and the adults are involved only in supportive roles (Fletcher, 2005; Hart, 1992).

Curriculum and Teaching Strategies / Cooperative Learning

One of the participants said they considered that the curriculum amplified student voice. SL1 believed that the curriculum encouraged thinking beyond the confines of textbooks and lessons. "*Our curriculum now encourages children to think outside the box, bring concerns to the teachers…"* (SL1). Group activities were also viewed as practices that strengthened student leadership and voice in the class. Student 22 expressed the view that *"Group activities in class help us collaborate as a team"* and helped to develop leadership skills.

Extracurricular and School Activities

The data indicates that the school provides a variety of extracurricular activities that serve as platforms for students to build student voice and cultivate leadership skills. Among these activities, the MUN programme stands out, as evidenced by the involvement of students 18, 19 and 22. This programme allows students to participate in conferences, discuss global issues, and work collectively towards solutions.

Another notable activity that the participating students also recognised as a significant means of amplifying student voice is the 'diplomathon', which is an educational event similar to the MUN, where students engage in role-playing activities that simulate international diplomacy and decision-making. The school also encourages students to participate in renowned initiatives such as TED Talks and the Duke of Edinburgh programme. These activities provide students with a platform from which to share their ideas and perspectives in a structured and influential manner. Furthermore, the school incorporates debates and group activities into the curriculum. According to the responses of students 12, 13, 15, and 19, these activities significantly increase student voice and build a culture of open dialogue and critical thinking.

Several participants said that various school activities and platforms, such as the promotion of social justice, nurturing of talents, and encouragement of competition, greatly enhanced student engagement and voice. The headteacher pointed out specific mechanisms within the school that encouraged student voice and activism. These mechanisms lead to a sense of student activism and involvement. For example, one of the students highlighted the importance of assemblies and moral education programmes as platforms to amplify student voice. Such platforms not only boost communication but also tackle students' concerns directly. Inter-school competitions were also seen as a

significant platform that boosted student voice while simultaneously developing the students' leadership skills, as noted by one of the students: *"Inter-school competitions and activities…all helped me develop my leadership skills"* (St11). These competitions allow students to articulate their ideas and exhibit their leadership abilities. The student newsletter was also recognised as a tool that enhanced student voices. This platform allows students to express their opinions, share their achievements, and contribute to school discussions. Furthermore, the students highlighted that sports were vital in the amplification of student voice and the growth of student leadership, as students 7 and 10 indicated during their interviews. They explained that participation in school teams enabled students to develop teamwork, leadership and communication skills, all of which contributed to strengthening their voices.

Finally, the participants highlighted the importance of volunteerism in the cultivation of student voice. One senior leader expressed the opinion that volunteering amplified student voice and encouraged them to participate in school events and practices, further fostering their leadership skills.

Student Participation

All the students who filled out the survey before the FGD confirmed that the school provided them with student voice opportunities. Moreover, they all confirmed that the school offers opportunities to foster their leadership skills. Table 4.3 shows the percentage of the students who participated in certain activities: decision-making, student voice activities, and student leadership activities.

Table 4.3 The percentages of the students who participated in the different activities.

Activity	Number of responses (N=25)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Participation of **all** students in student voice and student leadership activities	25	80	20
Participation in the **decision-making** process	25	72	28
Participation in **student voice activities**	25	96	4

According to the student survey, most students (80%) confirmed that the school involved **all** the students in student voice and leadership activities. The teachers and leaders confirmed during the interviews that all the students were required to participate in the activities, such as class council and house systems, at ISE. Additionally, all the students can nominate themselves for the school councils. During the FGD, the students validated that they consistently participated in the school's activities, such as school council, class council, houses, and school activities. For instance, one of the students stated: *"I feel that it's pretty consistent in our school for students to be involved in the overall leadership [through activities]…"* (St8). Another student said: *"**Everyone**, at least once in their lifetime, at least they're part of the **initiative,** or they're starting something so that that is a start to the solution of the problem"* (St4).

Similarly, most (96%) of the students confirmed that they participated in the student voice activities offered by the school. One student alone contradicted the other participants: *"I've never been **selected** to voice my thoughts, but sometimes when I do feel a few things need to be known by my supervisors, I do voice my opinion"* (St2). Still, this statement indicates that the student is allowed to voice his/her opinion when there is a need. One student (student 9) in the FGD stated that the school leaders at ISE ensured a broad representation of each grade section when students' opinions were sought. This included students who engaged extensively in extracurricular activities and those who did not, as well as those who excelled in their academic performance, those who performed at an average level,

and those who might be struggling academically ('low achievers'). This process ensures that a comprehensive perspective is captured. This finding resonated with the views of most students, despite my interviewing only a selected few. The process that the leaders follow is aligned with the upper rung of Hart's Ladder (1992) because it promotes 'adult-initiated, shared decisions with children'. This represents a balanced approach to decision-making, in which the voices and opinions of students are valued and considered in the final decisions. It respects the diversity in student experiences and acknowledges the importance of their input.

Some participants stated that the school encouraged the participation of quiet students to increase those students' participation. One of the teachers indicated that they developed relationships based on mutual trust to build confidence in quiet students in order to amplify their voices and see their impact.

Another way to encourage participation is by giving responsibility. The participants stated that the supervisors at ISE kept a list of students' initiatives and asked them to brainstorm ideas or join different projects based on their interests. The educators' sentiments at ISE indicate that they honour the differences among the students and seek to support the quiet students or those who do not want to develop their leadership skills without pressure, which resonates with the findings of Linden and Fertman (1998).

On the other hand, two interviewees and two discussants in the FGD expressed the view that the aim of involving **all** students in student voice activities was sometimes a barrier. One of the participants in the FGD said that they sometimes missed out on opportunities due to a lack of interaction. *"Sometimes people do miss out on things if they don't talk a lot ..."* (St1). Although the school leaders at ISE exert a lot of effort to ensure that they involve all the students in the activities and decision-making process, one of the senior leaders believed that *"...our challenge remains in ensuring that we can reach all groups of students and that we are giving them enough time for their input.…"* (SL2).

Students' Involvement in Decision-making

When asked in the student survey if students were involved in the decision-making process, a large majority (72%) answered 'yes' However, a minority (28%) of students indicated that the school did not involve them in its decision-making process as it made the final decision. One of the students said: *"I do feel a little disappointed over the fact that we students don't get to make differences in school decisions"* (St2). Another student expressed the view that students were not involved in decision-making but could request a change in the decision or make suggestions: *"No, although we aren't involved in decision-making, we can request the teachers to change their decision or make suggestions to make the decision better"* (St23). Another student stated that he/she used to participate in the decision-making but had stopped because he/she wanted to focus on academic work.

During the FGD, the students justified why a minority of students felt that they were not involved in the decision-making process. For instance, student 3 stated:

> *"Whenever decisions are being made on something that students are vocal about, it might not always come to what they wanted at the end, like they may not get the desired outcome from it, but their voices are always heard by senior students, by teachers even. So, it's not that we aren't being given a platform, but until we formulate a proper plan and action for change, teachers will want us to work on something that will stick. So, I think in that aspect, sometimes we do get a No here and there, but I think students of [ISE] are very, like, persuasive. So they always, like, stick it until they get what they want*" (St3).

Similarly, student 7 answered 'no', but justified their answer as the student thought that "*…sometimes the reasons why we may get no…and they tell us how to improve our ideas so that we can get a yes"* (St7). The percentage who felt that they were not involved seems realistic, as one of the senior leaders stated that the school was selective, so not all students would be involved in the decision-making process. They chose students who were articulate and confident in speaking up: *"...I do think that it's the articulate students, the*

ones who are confident in speaking up…well-selected students and individuals, children who come to the front…etc." (SL1).

The participants said that more children had been involved in decisions once they had implemented the holacracy management model and distributed leadership, compared with the previous system, which had involved the use of a head boy and head girl. The senior leader also stated that the school was working to broaden the group of involved students.

Evaluation of Student Voice and Leadership Activities at ISE

Participants at ISE highlighted that student voice and leadership activities were evaluated in three ways: *the percentage of students' participation*, conducting surveys, *and the number of student-led initiatives*. However, there was no evidence from qualitative or quantitative surveys that showed the impact of these activities. One of the senior leaders admitted that the effectiveness of their student leadership practices had not been evaluated quantitatively. The leader highlighted that *"in terms of quantitative, we have not done anything, but we plan to do a survey with these people [those who participate in the activities]"* (SL3). However, the leaders and teachers considered that there was a long-term benefit because of the student voice at ISE. One of the teachers stated that this was *"because we feel [that] every programme, if it's designed around students, that's where we will find the most impact and long-term benefits"* (T1). Having a quantitative measure would be helpful, but it may be challenging to achieve; as Hart (1992) argues, "unfortunately, these benefits have the kind of indirect, long-term impact that cannot be easily measured quantitatively" (p.34). The high percentage of students participating in the activities, which exceeded 70% according to the data collected, was positive, and the nature of the activities positively impacted the students and the school's community (Fletcher, 2005).

In line with the deductive approach, it can be said that the student voice and leadership activities at ISE demonstrate a commendable alignment with Hart's Ladder of Participation (1997) and Mitra's Pyramid model (2006a), as they foster genuine student engagement and empowerment effectively. For instance, considering Hart's Ladder, the school's initiatives have successfully moved beyond tokenism, evident in the developed council system, to meaningful degrees of participation. Activities such as challenge-based projects, assemblies and debates ensure that students are assigned roles with informed responsibilities, while class councils and feedback surveys enhance consultation and information-sharing. Furthermore, adult-initiated projects with shared decision-making, such as the POD system, empower students to collaborate with adults to work on school reform; although their participation is limited, such a system promotes a collaborative environment. In line with the higher rungs, student-led initiatives such as the research paper colloquium and the World Scholar's Club reflect student-initiated, shared decisions with adults that foster leadership and innovation.

In parallel, Mitra's Pyramid features the school's commitment to building student capacity. The school nurtures students' abilities to initiate and implement ideas confidently through initiatives such as leadership training, logistical support, and platforms such as TEDx and the student newsletter. Collaboration is further emphasised as teachers guide and approve student initiatives, while mechanisms such as surveys, the open-door policy, and project PRISM ensure that students are heard. Collectively, these frameworks illustrate the school's dedication to creating a dynamic environment in which students voice their opinions and influence and transform their educational experiences. The participants highlighted several benefits of the students' activities in which they took part. The following section features the benefits of student voice and leadership activities, as explained by the participants.

Benefits of Student Voice and Student Leadership

To answer research question three, I asked the participants why school leaders should foster and support student voice and leadership in the school. The participants highlighted that supporting and promoting the student voice and leadership activities at ISE was essential because they brought advantages and benefits for the students: the conduct of such activities directly influenced the learning and school environment, and learning of life skills. The participants affirmed that the main benefit of student voice was that it prepared students for the workplace and life beyond school by equipping them with essential life skills. The literature mentions these advantages, such as the positive influence on the school climate and culture (Busher, 2012) learning environment (Fletcher, 2005) and school improvement (Lambert, 2003; Robbins and Alvy, 2004; Witty, Wisby et al., 2007), alongside other advantages, such as discipline (Lickona, 1991; Schmidt et al., 2005). Therefore, according to the data that was collected in this study, the developed themes include the influence of activities on:

1. **improved learning experience;**
2. **improved school environment; and**
3. **equipping the students with essential life skills.**

1. Improved Learning Experience

Some participants said that a benefit of student voice was that it helped to improve the learning experience. For instance, one of the teachers stated that student voice was essential for effective learning: *"They [students] learn because they have a voice"* (T1). Moreover, in the open-ended survey, some students highlighted that student voice activities inside the class made the students more engaged in the teaching and learning process. The headteacher said that the use of student voice helped the school to

challenge both students and teachers to produce better learning practices. Student 12 stated that *"taking part in student voice activities benefits not only me [as a student] but also others. Learning new skills from peers helps [me] better understand, the communication [is] simpler"* (St12). Some students expressed the view that the application of student voice had helped to improve learning practices as the activities allowed them to control their learning and the school experience. The data indicates that the student voice activities at ISE have led to the implementation of innovative educational initiatives for senior staff, teachers and students, such as assessment practices, student projects, and research, which has impacted learning and improved the overall school performance.

2. Improved School Environment

The students, teachers, and leaders identified an improved school environment as one of the main benefits of student voice and student leadership activities. The students in the FGD and some participants in interviews expressed their opinion that the use of student voice helped to achieve community connection and relationships. This aligns with Fletcher's (2005) argument regarding the benefits of meaningful student involvement. For example, one of the students stated that the consideration of students' opinions in school decisions fostered an inclusive environment, higher morale and greater support among students. One of the students spoke about this:

> "*It [student voice] makes the school a more inclusive place. Because when you bring in different opinions of people who are affected by these choices, then the decisions that are taken are a lot more inclusive of the school body as a whole"* (St3).

Student 3 added: *"As a community, knowing that requests and suggestions of different groups of people with different views are respected and given equal opportunity helps build trust and respect among the school community"*. Another student stated that the student voice activities *"brought about a greater sense of*

understanding and unity" (St13).

Similarly, one of the senior leaders stated that community connectedness and relationships were impacted by the student voice in the school and that this climate led to essential teaching-learning elements in children's everyday experiences. Some participants said that the progressive atmosphere was a student voice benefit that improved the school environment.

In the FGD, the students explained that they considered the student voice at ISE to be authentic and that this was required for the activities to be beneficial. To this end, one of the students explained that working with the leaders to find solutions and to implement change had helped to improve the school environment because the students' input to solve problems had built a culture of trust between the students and leaders. A student stated:

> *"So I think, through that, many student leaders are coming up and student voices must be very authentic because when that's authentic is when true change can take place."* (St5).

Some students in the student survey said that there had been progress in the school environment as some changes had improved their classes better and benefited the students. For instance, one of the students said that the *"student voice activities help the school to grow, as they show the school what the students want and help the school provide a better environment for students"* (St20). Similarly, one of the senior leaders articulated that student voice empowered students to become agents of change and improved school environments, leading to progressive systems and processes: *"As a broader school strategy, empowering students to become change agents leads to a better school environment. It leads to a progressive school environment*" (SL1).

Some participants stated that the student voice activities helped to satisfy students while improving the school environment. In the FGD, student 9 stated that being part of the team and participating in initiatives could relieve the stress of the academic burden.

The students highlighted that the school environment felt comforting and satisfying as the teachers became more aware of student problems: *"I think our teachers became more aware of the problems the students were facing and how we can change that"* (St19).

The data indicates that the leaders at ISE have a good understanding of ways to involve students in decision-making for school improvement and the benefits of doing so. However, the system is not sufficiently mature to use the term "radical agents of change" as described by Fielding (2001, p.123) as there is still a need for students to move beyond expressing their opinions and actively participate in transforming the educational system.

3. Equipping the Students with Essential Life Skills

The data reveals that the students gain life skills from participation in the school's activities. Some skills that are enhanced include confidence, emotional and holistic development, global awareness, improved communication, leadership and decision-making, listening, negotiating, open-mindedness, problem-solving, resilience, and time management.

Self-awareness and Open-mindedness

Some of the respondents to the open-ended survey expressed the view that their school experiences had increased their worldly awareness. For instance, *"I think my time in our school has made me a more self-aware student; I am more aware of the world I am growing into as well as the individual I am becoming"* (St19). Similarly, one student stated that student voice and leadership activities "*helped me become more international*

minded" (St16). Some survey participants said that another benefit of student voice and leadership was the development of open-mindedness, as the students believed that they embraced different perspectives on the same problem. A senior leader stated that student voice pushed students to be more aware of the world around them. Therefore, students were prepared to be global citizens.

Confidence

Some participants believed that confidence was an acquired skill that was globally competitive. The FGD students explained that their student voice system made them confident to express their opinions to seniors. Similarly, through the survey, some students expressed the opinion that student voice and leadership activities made them more confident. For instance, student 2 stated that she felt confident that they can share their opinions and feedback about the teachers' performance. One of the students highlighted "*… voicing my opinions about a few teachers with my supervisor made me feel confident that I can stand up for things"* (St2). Another student said: *"Before [taking part in student voice activities] I was shy and introverted, but now, I am confident and bold"* (St4). Another student stated that the student voice activities *"increased my confidence to address the problems in the school"* (St6). Similarly, some students expressed their view that student voice helped to inculcate globally competitive skills through emotional and holistic development. In the FGD, student 4 stated that individual development was crucial to enable the individual to raise concerns and awareness, as a lack of holistic growth could lead to suffering in silence. The students highlighted that schools play a pivotal role in developing these skills. Similarly, in the student open-response survey, some participants said they considered that student voice and leadership helped them to grow and to develop social skills such as empathy

Communication Skills

Through the open-ended survey, some students said that a benefit of student voice was

that it helped them to improve their communication skills, which they considered another globally competitive skill. In the FGD, one of the students stated that her supervisor had organised an assembly to improve their communication skills.

> *"I'm very terrified of public speaking. I don't think it's something that I'm proud of, so I want to work on it. And the supervisor sort of incorporated [with me], and gave [me] little things to do, but good to go on stage and sort of do something in front of [my] peers*" (St3).

Decision-making Skills

Some students believed that they could develop leadership and decision-making skills, which they considered global skills, through student voice activities at ISE. The students said they could decide on whatever was good for them.

Listening Skills

Some of the respondents to the open-response survey revealed that the use of student voice developed listening skills; in the words of one student, student voice helped him to *"learn the importance of listening"* (St7). Student 20 stated that the student voice had helped them to realise that it was important not only to say one's opinion but also to listen to others' opinions. A respondent in the open-ended survey said that the student voice had helped them to develop negotiating skills: *"I also learned how to negotiate and not sound rude"* (St11).

Problem-solving Skills

Some of the participants said that use of the student voice had helped them to develop problem-solving skills. Senior leader 2 said that through student voice, the students had become aware of global opportunities and their ability to problem-solve to implement change, which was crucial to produce effective societal changemakers.

> *"They have become aware of a lot of opportunities happening in the world. They have become aware of their ability to implement change. And that is crucial because ultimately the role of a school is to produce not just good*

> *students but to produce people who can implement change in society"* (SL2).

Time-management Skills

Other skills acquired were time management and time-balancing skills. In the FGD, some students said they thought that student voice and leadership activities had helped them learn how to manage their time and balance their activities. Students in grade 11 developed skills to prioritise and manage their time through student-led initiatives. One of the students explained: "*We've learned …prioritising and time management skills because in grade 11, especially we all have to or because we see everyone, we indulge in some student-led initiatives"* (St5).

Another student said that student voice had taught students to prioritise and manage extracurricular alongside academic activities, as neglecting extracurricular events could lead to burnout and hinder development in grade 11.

> *"For me, it was a time to learn about how to prioritise, like [she] said, and how to actually manage both. Because if you just completely indulge yourself in academics, by the time you come out of it you're going to be so burnt out that it's going to be very hard for you to sort of gain that momentum of extracurricular and academics back, especially in grade 11"* (St6).

Responsibility

The participants said that the active participation of students in student voice activities, such as the council system at ISE, had contributed to the development of responsibility. One of the students highlighted that the activities empowered the students to take ownership of their actions, encouraged accountability, and promoted critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Teacher 1 said that students were given responsibility through student voice, which made them architects of their own lives to decide what was good for them. A senior leader stated that students should be instructed not only about consequences and expectations, but also their rights and freedoms so that they could

maximise their skills. Similarly, in the open-response survey, students stated that student voice made them feel responsible for their lives. Students 3 and 15 stated: *"I think it makes me feel more responsible"* and *"It made me a responsible citizen"* respectively. Another student said that the student voice had helped her to become more disciplined.

Work Skills

Some participants believed that student voice and leadership activities prepared students for work experiences. The participants emphasised that the activities were crucial in order to equip students with the necessary skills for the workplace and professional competencies. For instance, teacher 1 said that giving students a voice benefited the working culture, allowing them to transition from secondary school to college and the workplace. It also encouraged them to voice their opinions and contribute to the world.

Some students stated that one of the global competitive skills acquired was personal working skills. According to student 8, student voice and leadership were crucial to cultivate personal skills, as leadership was essential in various work environments.

> *"Student voice and student leadership are what help us cultivate our own personal skills for when we will grow up and get jobs because leadership is extremely important in all sorts of work environments"* (St8).

A senior leader participant expressed their view that the thinking of students in the current generation was slightly different from that in their generation. According to senior leader 3:

> *"We come from a different generation and our thinking is slightly different from the students who are living in this world, because they say that the children, every generation, are more intelligent than the previous generation"* (SL3).

The headteacher explained that student voice and leadership were important to prepare children to do well in the world. Also, the participants affirmed that student voice was essential to prepare students for the experiences of life and work.

Emerging Themes

The analysis of participant interviews revealed several interrelated themes that illuminated both the continuity of student voice and leadership activities at the ISE, as well as the barriers that hindered their effective implementation. These themes underscore the necessity for enhanced teacher training and the introduction of additional platforms for student voice.

A significant barrier identified by participants was the lack of motivation among some students. For instance, SL1 remarked that "*some students lack motivation to raise their voice*", indicating that disengaged students may not feel encouraged to participate. Similarly, teacher 1 said: "*Sometimes the quiet and demotivated come into the most challenging category for a teacher."* These statements align with the findings of Conner (2022), who emphasises that a lack of engagement can lead to diminished student voice in educational settings. Hart (1997) argues that it is essential that motivational barriers are addressed to ensure that student-voice initiatives are genuinely participatory rather than tokenistic.

Fear emerged as another critical barrier, with teacher 1 stating: *"Some students prefer to write as they are too scared to speak publicly"*. Another senior leader added: "[A student] says that 'when I write, I don't have a fear of criticism. But when I speak, I have the fear of criticism that somebody is making judgment on me'" (SL3). This fear of judgment can inhibit students from voicing their opinions. These findings echo those of Rudduck and Flutter (2004), who argue that fear of negative feedback stifles genuine expression. Silva (2001) cautions that efforts to increase student voice can inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies, and that this issue highlights the importance of fostering

equitable relationships in school environments. This dynamic reflects the broader discourse in educational reform, which emphasises the need for safe spaces in which students can express themselves without fear of reprisal (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Participants also discussed the *lack of confidence* exhibited by some students. Senior leader 3 noted that “some students naturally don’t speak up”, suggesting that personality traits can act as barriers to participation. This finding resonates with literature that indicates that confidence-building initiatives are crucial for fostering student voice (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Research by Mitra (2006) supports this, emphasising that schools must implement targeted interventions that encourage self-esteem and assertiveness among students, enabling them to take on leadership roles.

Participants noted that time limitations and rigid curriculum structures posed significant barriers to student-voice activities. Senior leader 2 expressed concern about tight schedules, stating, *“we are a little tight on time”*. One of the students echoed this concern: “*So, I think that a lot of children in my grade [secondary school] especially don't take up opportunities of extracurricular activities because of academics, because there's a lot of portions to cover and it's great”* (St2). This observation echoes findings by Conner (2022) that suggest that curriculum demands often overshadow opportunities for student engagement. As outlined by Mitra (2006), schools must adopt flexible curricular approaches that prioritise student involvement in order to ensure that academic pressures do not stifle opportunities for expression and participation.

In light of these barriers, participants proposed actionable steps to amplify student voice at ISE. The headteacher emphasised the importance of creating varied platforms for student expression: “We need to ensure that every student has a chance to contribute.” One of the students suggested that the school *“have a bucket outside the supervisor's*

office, where students can drop down anonymous suggestions" (St19). This aligns with literature that advocates the use of diverse methods to capture student perspectives, such as suggestion boxes and structured discussions (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). These methods are essential for fostering a culture of inclusivity and ensuring that all voices, particularly those of marginalised students, are heard and valued.

Additionally, there is a pressing need for comprehensive teacher training that is focused on student engagement strategies. As one senior leader noted, "*we need to support teachers to enhance student voice*", indicating the necessity for targeted professional development. The teacher mentioned*: "I would love to learn more about ways to get my students involved"* T1. The participants highlighted the need for professional development to support and train new and resistant teachers in ways to boost student voice in ISE. Participants said that to help new teachers amplify student voice, the school should support them by developing a reward system, providing teachers with clear responsibilities, ensuring constant communication and conversation, and offering mentoring or guidance.

One of the interviewees stated that it was essential to support new teachers who resisted implementing student voices. A senior leader stated that there was a need for *"celebrating a teacher's understanding or engagement of student voice so that other teachers learn from him or her"* (SL1).

Moreover, the headteacher stated that supporting teachers to enhance student voice required giving the teachers responsibilities: the way to encourage new or resistant teachers *"is to ask them to lead student voice projects themselves. So, when they lead on a student voice project, they have no option but to listen"* (HT). Similarly, two interviewees said that the school constantly conversed with new or resistant teachers to

support them in the enhancement of student voice. For example, teacher one advised that the school should *"keep the internal communication that keeps popping up in our inbox…I think it's quite embedded in us that, you know, that our student is at the heart of everything that we do at our school"* (T1).

Two interviewees stated that education was a support for new or resistant teachers to enhance student voice. One of the teachers spoke about the workshops they experienced that helped them learn how to amplify student voice:

> *"…my first lesson in student voice…was in India. We have a lot of professional development workshops and policies and frameworks, of course, aligned with the [school's] policies which are given and shared with us…"* (T1).

Similarly, senior leader 1 recommended *"awareness" and "professional development for the education of teachers"*.

Furthermore, three participants said that mentoring and guidance were the school's support for teachers who found it hard to enhance student voice. According to one of the participants, the school guides teachers to settle. *"The company's motto is, we…also see the genius in every teacher because they really give teachers an opportunity to find their feet"* (T1). In addition, senior leader 1 expressed their view that all teachers are learning, and it is crucial to guide them. *"So, I think every teacher is on a journey, and we have to carry them along with us"* (SL1). This finding aligns with those of Owen (2007), who asserts that teachers must be equipped with the necessary skills in order to nurture an environment in which student voices are actively integrated into decision-making processes. Furthermore, research by Dempster and Lizzio (2007) underscores the importance of ongoing professional development to help educators to shift from traditional pedagogical approaches to more collaborative, student-centred practices. While the leaders and teachers confirmed that they worked with 'quiet' students, the participants emphasised the importance of involving under-engaged students to amplify

the student voice. Moreover, one of the senior leaders suggested that opportunities for student voice should also be provided to younger students as they grow up. Additionally, in the open-ended survey, one of the students indicated that the school should “lift up under-engaged [students]” (St16).

Cultural and familial influences were also emphasised as factors that affected students’ willingness to engage in voice activities. The headteacher highlighted: *“[The parents of] students from diverse backgrounds may not have had the same educational experiences”*, indicating that cultural norms impact participation. Senior leader 2 added that some students did not speak in student-voice activities because some were not encouraged to speak at home: *“Very early on [at home] in life, they have not been given certain opportunities”* (SL2). This sentiment aligns with the report from Cook-Sather (2006), who argues that students' backgrounds must be understood in order to create inclusive educational practices. Moreover, the works of Thomson (2011) underscore the need for schools to recognise the diverse voices within their student populations and ensure that marginalised voices are included in the discourse. This piece of data needs further exploration; however, it may indicate that some parents’ backgrounds lead them not to support student-voice activities, particularly among girls. Alternatively, it may suggest that families do not want their children to be distracted by these activities at the expense of their studies. The struggle to balance academic performance with extracurricular involvement is a widely recognised challenge for students, as research indicates that some families favour academic work over student engagement and that some parents and schools view student-voice activities as hindrances to essential academic work (Marsh and Kleitman, 2002).

The headteacher talked about issues with authoritarianism getting in the way of student voice: “I think one of the barriers we face is that…we have, we've had in the past people come in with a very authoritarian version of leadership…including…newer

teachers” (HT). This challenge resonates with criticism 1 of student voice, which was power imbalance in relationships, as the traditional power dynamics may create uncertainty for students and teachers and can lead to anxiety. This issue is highlighted by Silva (2001): “Some efforts to increase student voice and participation can reinforce a hierarchy of power” (p.98). This concern indicates that the distributed or holacratic leadership styles are not embedded in the ISE system and are not used as a systematic approach by all the teachers in their classes. Adult mindset is mentioned by Conner (2022) as a reason why some leaders and teachers might resist changing their teaching style or sharing decision-making power with students.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In summary, student voice is a significant factor that fosters student leadership in schools. Its development is not an overnight process and is not limited to listening to students. Student leadership develops gradually by allowing students to express their thoughts, opinions, and knowledge in depth, and involving them in decision-making processes in collaboration with teachers. There is an urgent need to examine student-voice activities by referring to theory. This is necessary to address what both Rudduck (2006) and Fielding (2004b) identify as a 'danger' in today's environment: that young people may be asked about their learning primarily to enhance standards and boost attainment rather than for personal growth, social development, or to foster a sense of active participation in their school community (Hart, 1997). Moreover, this examination can help to clarify the values that underpin school student-voice activities.

The findings indicate a significant need for a more cohesive and theoretically informed strategy regarding student voice at the school. This urgent need arises from the fact that despite commendable student-leadership practices at ISE, the school lacks a clear school-wide understanding and integration of student voice as a core component of its educational approach. Hence, ISE must re-evaluate its existing student-voice activities through a more critical, theory-informed lens to ensure genuine student participation in decision-making processes.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its in-depth exploration of the specific practices and strategies employed by school leaders to amplify student voice and foster development of student leadership. While the existing literature on student voice provides valuable theoretical frameworks, such as Hart's Ladder of Participation and Mitra's Pyramid of Student Voice, the practical application of these concepts within school settings has been underexplored. This research addresses this gap by

investigating the concrete activities, initiatives, and structures that a high-performing school adopts to engage students as active partners in decision-making processes and to nurture their leadership capabilities.

Moreover, the study proposes an integrated model that combines student voice, life skills, and character education to generate ‘principled student leaders’. This model offers a comprehensive approach to student leadership development, going beyond the traditional focus on student voice alone. By positioning student voice as a core component alongside the cultivation of essential life skills and character traits, the model provides a holistic framework that schools can use to empower students as engaged, ethical leaders.

The findings from this research, along with the proposed integrated model, contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing practical, evidence-based strategies that school leaders can employ to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the realm of student voice and student leadership development. This study serves as a valuable resource for educators who seek to create more inclusive, participatory, and empowering educational environments.

Main Findings

The outcomes from the research study, which was conducted at the International School of Excellence (ISE), align with the academic literature on student voice and leadership. This alignment is particularly evident in the contributions of pivotal scholars, including Hart (1992), Mitra (2006), Fielding (2001, 2004b), and Rudduck (2000), whose perspectives provide a foundational framework for understanding the dynamics of student engagement and leadership in educational contexts. Moreover, the findings not only illuminate these theoretical foundations but also directly engage with the research questions that were set in the study. Contributions from scholars such as Cook-Sather (2007, 2023), Fletcher (2015), and Lambert (2003) significantly enhance this discourse,

underscoring the practical implications of student voice in the development of leadership skills.

Hart's Ladder of Participation provides a foundational framework upon which to evaluate levels of student involvement in decision-making processes at ISE. Hart (1992) emphasises the importance of moving beyond tokenistic participation to ensure authentic engagement. The study reflects this through its development of distributed leadership models, which are shown at ISE through the council system and holacracy. These align with the higher rungs of Hart's Ladder that emphasise shared decision-making and student-led initiatives.

Mitra's Pyramid of Student Voice further complements this understanding by illustrating the developmental progression from being heard to collaborating with adults and building leadership capacity. Mitra (2006) underscores the connection between student voice and leadership, which is a theme that is evident at ISE, where various student-voice activities are designed to cultivate leadership skills. The findings address RQ1, demonstrating that successful student-voice practices foster student leadership and are interrelated with effective school improvement.

Fielding's work cautions against the superficial adoption of student-voice initiatives and highlights the importance of genuine engagement. This resonates with the challenges at ISE, where the absence of a unified definition of student voice in the school's vision and mission highlights the need for deeper integration, as does the lack of policies and systems to ensure consistent implementation. Fielding (2001) emphasises the necessity of incorporating student perspectives into school improvement efforts; this goal is only partially realised at ISE.

Rudduck and Flutter (2004) advocate student participation as a catalyst for leadership growth. ISE's practices, such as circle time and class councils, embody this principle by providing students with platforms from which they can express their opinions and

influence school policies. Cook-Sather (2006) underscores the significance of treating students as partners in the educational process; this concept is reflected in ISE's initiatives that are aimed at involving students in meaningful roles. Fletcher's (2005) Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement reinforces the vision of engaging students as active participants in school change, and this aligns seamlessly with ISE's distributed leadership approach.

Lambert (2003) posits that the inclusion of student voices is fundamental to student development, asserting that every student has the potential to lead. This perspective resonates within ISE, where student-voice activities are intended to equip students with essential life skills and leadership capabilities.

However, despite these promising alignments, the study has brought to light several gaps between practice and literature at the school. Notably, ISE lacks a cohesive definition of student voice, a critical component for effective implementation as emphasised by both Fielding and Rudduck. Although student expression is encouraged, the efforts in this direction often fall short of translating into substantial decision-making power. These findings highlight a disconnect that has been identified by Hart and Mitra regarding authentic student agency.

Moreover, the risk of tokenism looms over ISE's initiatives due to inconsistent follow-through on student feedback, which has been warned of by Fielding. The absence of structured measurement tools to assess the impact of student-voice activities accentuates the dissonance between practice and literature recommendations that rigorous evaluation and reflection be incorporated into systems.

Barriers such as a lack of confidence among students and conservative attitudes within the institution challenge the inclusivity that scholars such as Cook-Sather and Fletcher advocate. The evident need for robust support structures and resources aligns with the literature's emphasis on fostering meaningful student involvement.

In summary, the study at ISE has produced several theoretical insights, and it highlights ongoing challenges in the full alignment of practice with established scholarship, and this underscores the need to cultivate a culture of genuine student voice and leadership. This alignment is essential if schools are to realise the full potential of student engagement as a transformative force in education.

Recommendations

The study recommends several critical actions for ISE. First, a shared understanding of student voice is developed that prioritises student involvement in decision-making processes. Integration of this definition into the school's vision and mission statements would solidify its importance. Second, teachers must be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to foster student voice within their classes. This can be achieved through targeted training programmes and establishment of clear systems and procedures for student voice initiatives.

Of the several recommendations, four should be considered priorities to further improve student voice activities at ISE. These priorities lay the groundwork for a comprehensive approach to the enhancement of student voice within the school.

1. **Unified Definition and Integration**

   Develop a unified definition of student voice and integrate it into the school's vision and mission statements. This foundational step would ensure that student voice is a core part of the school’s identity and objectives.

2. **Teacher Training and Professional Development**

   Implement training programmes for all teachers, especially those new to the school, to use strategies that amplify student voice and leadership. Equipping teachers with the necessary skills is crucial to nurture an environment in which student voices are heard.

3. **Establish a Student Voice Council**

   A Student Voice Council should be set up that includes diverse student representation. This structured approach ensures that student voices are systematically gathered and considered in decision-making processes.

4. **Develop Measurement Tools to Evaluate Impact**

   Develop and apply both quantitative and qualitative tools, using Hart's Ladder (1992) as a reference, to assess the short- and long-term impacts of student voice activities. This evaluation should also include measurement of the effects of these activities and student-led initiatives on students after they graduate. School leaders should ensure the effectiveness of the council system by developing tools to evaluate its impact on council members over time. Comprehension of these immediate and lasting impacts will help to guide improvements and highlight the importance of nurturing student voice within the school.

The school can also benefit from the following recommendations.

- The school leaders should develop systems and standard operating procedures for student voice activities to be kept in one place, to be used as a reference to ensure consistency.
- The school leaders should revisit the criteria that are used to select students to ensure that students across the schools can access the different activities.
- The school leaders should re-evaluate the many activities and initiatives in line with Hart's Ladder, in order to prioritise involving the students in the decision-making process.
- The school leaders should categorise and differentiate the activities under student voice and student leadership.

- Further work is needed to explore the effects of the activities on fostering student leadership over three years.
- The school leaders should conduct a study to compare the effects of activities on students who are involved in activities compared with those who do not get involved.
- Further work is needed to measure the impact of student-led initiatives on the students after-school graduation.

Addressing these recommendations can help ISE to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and to create a genuinely empowering environment in which student voices translate into tangible effects over their educational experiences.

A Proposed Model

In my MA in 2014, I proposed the 'principled student leader' model, which is shown in Figure 5.1. This model combines life skills and character education to generate student leadership. It equips students with twenty-first-century life skills and instils values by adopting a character education programme at the school level. I recommend the introduction of this model to schools because it systematically promotes democratic, cooperative, and collaborative classes.

Character Education + Life Skills → principled student leader

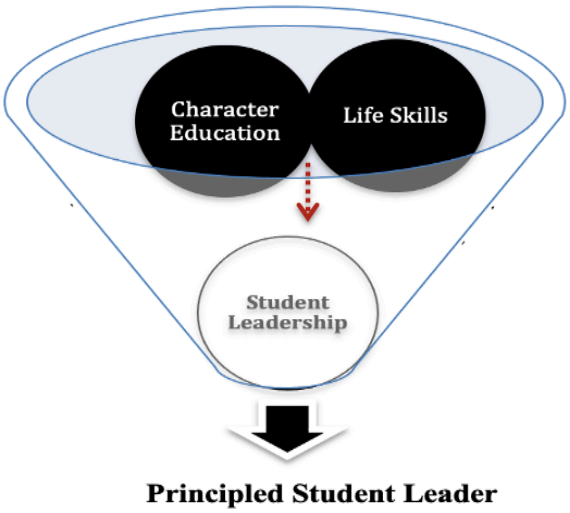


Figure 5.1 A merged model of character education and life skills to produce principled student leaders (Abu-Shamat, 2014).

However, the MA research showed evidence that only genuine student voice activities could foster student leadership. Hence, in the evolution of the student leadership model, I revised the model to include 'student voice' in addition to the latest life skills and character education. This revision marks a fundamental enhancement that reflects a comprehensive approach to the development of principled student leaders. Initially focused on character education and life skills, the model now recognises the importance of empowering students to express their perspectives and participate actively in their educational journey. By positioning student voice as a core component, the model underscores its role in fostering a sense of agency and responsibility among students. This integration ensures that student feedback and insights are valued, and promotes a more inclusive and responsive educational environment.

The model shows two types of strategies to involve all the students in the activities according to their interests and choices: school-wide and class-wide. Class activities must be compulsory, and all teachers should implement these practices through their

subject lessons systematically during school hours. The students should feel free to participate as the activities are embedded within the lessons. The school-wide activities should be selective or optional based on the students' choices, interests, characters and abilities. The school-wide activities may include extracurricular activities and after-school programmes.

In this way, the school can encourage the involvement of all the students at the class level to develop their skills by design without being selective. When students feel prepared to engage in the decision-making process with adults, they can take part in school-wide activities based on their choices and preferences.

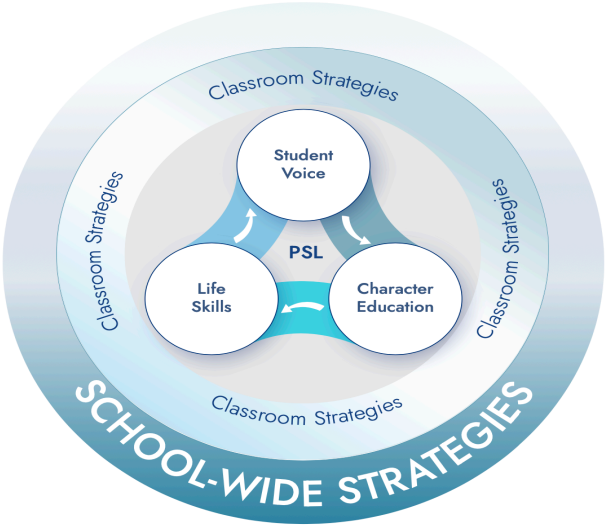
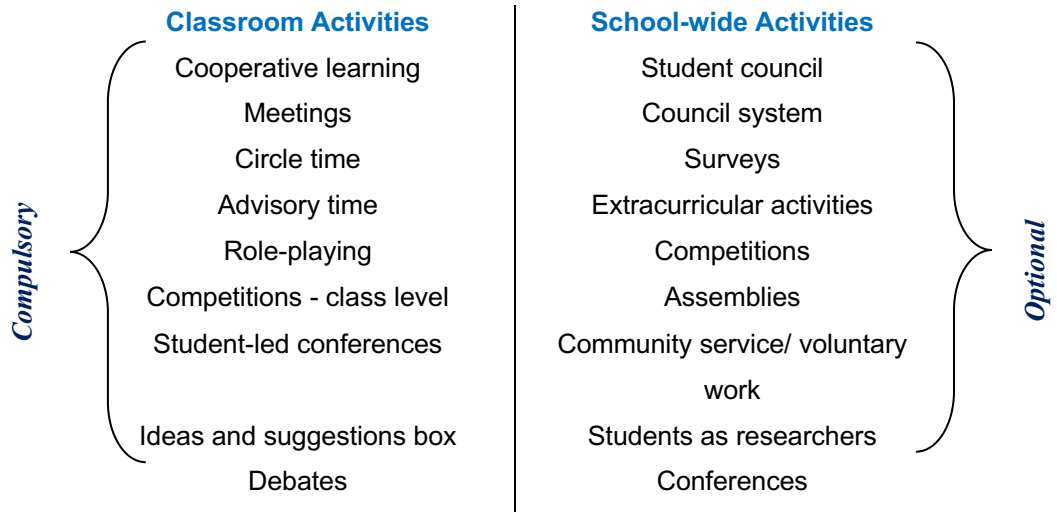


Figure 5.2 Proposed model to amplify student voice and foster student leadership. PSL: principled student leader.

To make this model practical, school leaders and teachers can apply several classroom and school-wide activities to foster student leadership, concentrating on character and twenty-first-century skills as listed in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Classroom activities and school-wide activities.



This model bridges the gap between theory, as explained in the literature, and practice. It also addresses the criticism that activities are often limited to a small group of students. The involvement of all students in student voice activities might be challenging at a practical level, but surrounding these efforts with class and school-wide strategies underscores the collaborative effort that is required to nurture leadership qualities. This approach prepares students to become confident and principled leaders in their communities.

Guidelines

To enable all students to participate meaningfully in the various student voice activities at the school level, school leaders should consider the following guidelines so that students will “feel confident enough to use their leadership in a meaningful way for the good of the school and community at large” (Owen, 2007, p.126).

School leaders should:

- collaborate with stakeholders to define student voice and integrate it into the school's vision and values;
- adopt a collaborative or shared leadership style and avoid authoritarian approaches;

- standardise and list student voice activities for both class and school-wide implementation, ensuring consistency across grade levels;
- develop a professional development programme for teachers to facilitate student collaboration;
- clearly communicate the purpose and implementation of each strategy and monitor class activities through observations;
- create student portfolios for reflections, and set a schedule for regular activity and reflection, such as monthly entries; and
- establish a system to record and report student outcomes to the community, using tools such as SMS messages or report cards.

Student Voice Matrix

Hart's Ladder of Participation provides a helpful framework for schools and educators who seek to evaluate the level of participation. The proposed matrix shows how the school would score it, considering two variables: the eight rungs of Hart's Ladder and the percentage of student participation in each activity.

Scoring student voice activities using Hart's Ladder

The first variable is the type of student voice activities. The school leaders and teachers can use Table 5.1 to score student voice activities based on Hart's Ladder. The matrix utilises Hart's Ladder to assess student involvement in decision-making activities. It categorises participation into different levels, from minimal to full student engagement. At the lower rungs (1-3), activities are adult-driven, with students having little influence; for instance, they may create posters or market the school. These activities are scored 0. Participation increases across rungs 4-6, on which activities involve students more actively, with adults leading but incorporating student input. Examples of activities are student councils and surveys, which are

scored between 4 and 6. The highest rungs, 7 and 8, reflect scenarios in which students lead initiatives with minimal adult intervention, such as students acting as researchers, and the scores are 7 or 8. The higher the score, the more student-centred and participatory the activity. I propose that the highest score be 8, which indicates that the students are at the highest level of the ladder.

Table 5.2 shows ways to evaluate and score student voice activities based on the extent of genuine influence and decision-making power that students have in various activities.

Table 5.2 Evaluation and scoring of student voice activities using Hart's Ladder of Participation.

Rung	Level of Participation	Activities	Score
1	Adults manipulate students in decision-making	Creation of a poster as instructed by teachers Use of the school's script to market the school	**0**
2	Adults use students to decorate their decisions	Decoration of classrooms Marketing the school on social media	**0**
3	Adults tokenise students in their decision-making	Class representative to listen to his peers only	**0**
4	Adult-led decision-making with students assigned to respond	Circle time Cooperative learning Group work	**4**
5	Adult-led decision-making informed by student voice	Surveys FGDs Student council Councils system	**5**
6	Adult-led decision-making shared with students	Collaboration with adults	**6**
7	Student-led, student-dedicated, student-centred decision-making	Students find a solution for a school issue with minimal adult intervention	**7**
8	Student-led decision-making shared with adults	Students as researchers Adults are not involved	**8**

Scoring the percentage of students' participation

The second variable is the percentage of student participation in the student voice activities. Educators can use Table 5.3 to score this by matching the rate of participation with the corresponding score, as shown in the table. The table outlines specific percentage ranges from 100% to less than 30% and assigns a score from 0 to

8. For instance, if student participation is between 90% and 99%, teachers and leaders should give a score of 7 out of 8. This scoring table provides a structured way to evaluate and quantify student engagement, and therefore it helps educators to assess and enhance student voice to foster student leadership.

Table 5.3 Scoring table for the percentage participation.

%Participation	100%	90-99%	80-89%	70-79%	60-69%	50-59%	40-49%	30-39%	<30%
Score	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0

.

Based on the two variables, I developed the student voice matrix, which is shown in Table 5.4. This matrix may serve as a quantitative tool and a starting point to evaluate the status quo of student voice and leadership activities at the school level. Furthermore, the school may include the numbers of decisions made in collaboration with students to evaluate the effectiveness of the student voice.

Table 5.4 The Matrix of Student Voice and Student Leadership.

		Level of Participation – Hart's Ladder						
% of Participation		1- 3	4	5	6	7	8	Student leadership
	8	Ineffective	Developing	Effective	Effective	Strong	Strong	
	7		Developing	Effective	Effective	Strong	Strong	
	6		Developing	Effective	Effective	Strong	Strong	
	5		Developing	Effective	Effective	Effective	Effective	
	4		Developing	Developing	Developing	Developing	Developing	
	3		Developing	Developing	Developing	Developing	Developing	
	2		Emerging	Emerging	Emerging	Emerging	Emerging	
	1		Emerging	Emerging	Emerging	Emerging	Emerging	

The terms 'strong,' 'effective,' 'developing,' and 'emerging' as used in the matrix are defined and characterised as explained below.

- **Strong:** Student voice and leadership are deeply integrated into the school's decision-making processes. The percentage of student participation is high, and

students actively engage in significant roles, exert a substantial influence on outcomes, and their feedback is highly valued and regularly implemented. There are high levels of student engagement, consistent collaboration with school leaders, teachers, and staff, as well as well-established and impactful leadership opportunities.

- **Effective:** Student voice and leadership are consistently utilised and have a positive impact on the school environment. Students are regularly consulted, and their input is often incorporated into school policies and practices. Regular student participation in decision-making, meaningful feedback loops, and leadership roles contribute positively to school initiatives.
- **Developing**: Student voice and leadership are recognised and encouraged, but their integration into school processes is evolving. Students have some opportunities to express their views and assume leadership roles, although these are not yet consistently influential. There is occasional or infrequent student involvement in decision-making, emerging leadership opportunities, and a growing culture that values student input.
- **Emerging:** student voice and leadership are in the early stages of development or do not exist. Opportunities for student input are limited, and students have minimal influence on school decisions. Initial efforts to include students in discussions exist, with few leadership roles available, but there is a developing recognition of the importance of student perspectives.

These definitions help assess the maturity and impact of student involvement in a school's culture and decision-making processes, as illustrated in the context of Hart's Ladder of Participation. The school must consider its context, which includes students' abilities, readiness, enthusiasm, and self-assurance when participating, along with the support and motivation that teachers and leaders offer to foster this involvement.

Plans for Dissemination

After exploring the concepts of student voice and student leadership, I plan to initiate action at two levels: policymakers and schools. At the policymaker level, I intend to advocate for the integration of student voice into the evaluation processes employed by educational authorities. This initiative aims to assess the impact of genuine student involvement on teaching, learning outcomes, and broader school reform. Such a step will ensure that student voice and leadership are systematically monitored, especially considering that private schools in Dubai undergo annual inspections by the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB). The UAE government places a high priority on education, making these inspections vital for accountability and improvement.

As a headteacher, I will implement this model as a pilot project to evaluate its practicality and impact on students' engagement with student voice, leadership, and character development. Recognising that the effects of such initiatives may not manifest in the short term, I propose the model be tested over at least 18 months (two academic years) to gauge its effectiveness. Following this pilot, I will submit a comprehensive proposal to the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) and the organisation where I work. This proposal will detail the model's implementation in classrooms and beyond while outlining an action plan that includes all stakeholders: school leaders, teachers, students, and parents.

In addition, I plan to write and publish articles sharing my findings and experiences in academic journals and through education-focused platforms. This will not only contribute to the body of knowledge around student voice and leadership but also spark dialogue among other education practitioners and school leaders in the Gulf and Middle East regions. I aim to present at academic conferences in order to engage with the

community, facilitate the exchange of innovative educational practices and promote collaboration. These conferences may include the NEASC conference, the IB conference, and others in the region.

The education system requires significant transformation, particularly for Generation Alpha, children born between 2010 and 2024. It is imperative that every student engages actively in their communities to foster a brighter future. In line with Dalton's assertion that all graduates should embody the change that inspires others, I will continue to advocate for student leadership as a cornerstone of educational practices.

Lastly, I will always refer to this quote to promote student leadership: "Students are not just learners; they are leaders in their own right, capable of shaping their futures and inspiring change in their communities." This philosophy will guide my efforts to cultivate a culture of active student participation and leadership within our educational framework. Lastly, I will always refer to this quote to promote student leadership:

"Because every student can learn, every student can lead."

(Lambert, 2003, p.55).

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The Appendix

Appendix 1

Permission Letter

Dear Principal,

I am a part-time research student at the Institute of Education (IoE) – University College London – (UCL). I am working on a research project titled "***Amplifying Student Voice and Moving Toward Student Leadership"***. I am conducting this research project to complete the doctorate thesis to obtain a Doctorate in Education Degree (EdD), focusing on Educational Leadership.

This letter seeks to gain your permission to conduct a piece of formal research within your school, specifically with 16 students from grade 9-12, yourself as a school principal, teachers and leaders.

The research tools will include a questionnaire/ survey, and semi-structured interviews.

I will share an information sheet with all the participants before conducting the research. Those interested in joining the research study; should sign a consent letter. As for the students, information letters will be sent out to their parents and a consent letter to permit their children to participate.

I am happy to discuss this with you further if you have any inquiries.

Sincerely yours,

Ghadeer Abu-Shamat

Appendix 2

Research informed consent (Headteacher)

Dear School Principal,

I would like to ask your consent to conduct a 60-minute, audio recorded, anonymous interview with you while involving you as a participant in a research inquiry about the student voice and student leadership activities and the best practices that school leaders implement to engage students in activities to foster student leadership.

This research is required to complete the doctorate thesis to obtain a Doctorate in Education Degree (EdD).

During the interview, you will be asked to answer a set of open-ended questions that will help me gain understanding about your perspective on student voice, student leadership, how you work with the students to amplify their voice within your capacity.

The plan is to record the interview for the purpose of the **research only**. I will use the audio recording to transcribe the data. The audio recording and transcripts of the interviews will be used to serve the research only. Parts of the transcripts might be shared with the supervisors Dr. Dina Mehmedbegović Smith only when/ if needed to establish trustworthiness of the data collection process. The transcribed data will be securely saved and will be destroyed after five years.

Your identity will remain **anonymous** and will never appear on any reports of this research. Participation in this research involves no known risks to you. You can withdraw from the research at any time without negative consequences.

Data Protection Privacy Notice
The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Office provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. UCL's Data Protection Officer can also be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk**.** Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found here: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/ucl-general-research-participant-privacy- notice

This is to confirm that I..…… *(your name)* agree to participate in the research project as explained verbally and in this informed consent.

Name: …… **Date:** …….

Signature: …….

I may be contacted via email:

Appendix 3

Research Information Sheet

Parent Version

Dear Parent,

I am a part-time research student at Institute of Education (IoE)- University College London – (UCL). I am working on a research project titled "***Amplifying Student Voice and Moving Toward Student Leadership"***. I am conducting this research project to complete the doctorate thesis to obtain a Doctorate in Education Degree (EdD), with a focus on Educational Leadership. The research will be conducted in English language only.

Further details about the research will be given in the answers to the questions below.

What is the aim of the Research?

I am conducting this research project to inquire about the student voice and student leadership activities and the best practices that school leaders implement to engage students in activities to foster student leadership.

How would I be involved?

I will collect the data for my research by using:

- Semi-structured **interviews:** I will conduct a 60- min interview with you.
- I will use the audio recording to transcribe the data. The audio recording and transcripts of the interviews will be used to serve the research only.

Is it a must for me to participate?

No, it's optional. If you decide to take part, you **can stop/withdraw at any time.**

Will my name be mentioned in the research?

The answers/ findings will be dealt with a high level of **confidentiality**. Your identity will remain anonymous and **will never appear on any reports of this research**. All your answers will be kept safe and secure with me only.

Who will have access to my answers?

All findings will be presented to my EdD supervisor at the IoE-UCL and will be presented in the form of a research report (thesis). However, your name **will not** be mentioned during the presentation of the findings or the writing-up of the research paper.

Is it only me who will take part in the research?

No. The sample will include the school principal, teachers, leaders; and 16 students from Grades 9-12.

For more information and details, you can visit the UCL website by clicking on the link below:
https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/ucl-general-research-participant-privacy-notice

Thank you,
Ghadeer Abu-Shamat

I may be contacted via email:

Appendix 4

Research Information Sheet

Student Version

Dear Student,

While I work as a headteacher in one of the schools in Dubai, I am also a student at Institute of Education (IoE)- University College London – (UCL). I am doing a course in educational leadership and I need to complete a research project as an assignment to obtain a doctorate degree. The topic of the research is "***Amplifying Student Voice and Moving Toward Student Leadership"***. The research will be conducted in English language only. This information sheet is used to present to you information about the research.

The aim of the Research:

- Inquire about the student voice and student leadership activities.
- Explore the best practices that school leaders implement to engage students in activities to foster student leadership.

I will gain answers for my research by using the below research tools:

- **Survey:** you will fill a survey before the interview.
- **Focus group interview:** I will conduct a 60- min interview with a group of students.

I will use the audio recording to transcribe the data. The audio recording and transcripts of the interviews will be used to serve the research only.

Your participation is optional:

It's not a must to participate. If you would like to take part, you **can stop / withdraw at any time.**

Confidentiality:

The answers/ findings will be dealt with a high level of **confidentiality**. Your name will remain anonymous and **will never appear on any reports of this research**. All your answers will be kept safe and secure with me only.

Access:

All findings will be presented to my EdD supervisor at the IoE-UCL and will be presented in the form of a research report (thesis) that will be accessible to you, your parents, and all other involved in the research. However, your name **will not** be mentioned during the presentation of the findings or the writing-up of the research paper.

Participants:

The sample will include the school principal, teachers, leaders; and 16 students from Grades 9-12 from your school.

Thank you,
Ghadeer Abu-Shamat

I may be contacted via email:

Appendix 5

Research Information Sheet

Teacher- Leader Version

Dear Teacher / Leader,

I am a part-time research student at Institute of Education (IoE) – University College London – (UCL). I am working on a research project titled "***Amplifying Student Voice and Moving Toward Student Leadership"***. I am conducting this research project to complete the doctorate thesis to obtain a Doctorate in Education Degree (EdD), with a focus on Educational Leadership. The research will be conducted in English language only.

Further details about the research will be given in the answers to the questions below.

What is the aim of the Research?

I am conducting this research project to inquire about the student voice and student leadership activities and the best practices that school leaders implement to engage students in activities to foster student leadership.

How would I be involved?

I will collect the data for my research by using:

- **Semi-structured interviews:** I will conduct a 60-min interview with you.
- I will use the audio recording to transcribe the data. The audio recording and transcripts of the interviews will be used to serve the research only.

Is it a must for me to participate?

No, it's optional. If you decide to take part, you **can stop / withdraw at any time.**

Will my name be mentioned in the research?

The answers/ findings will be dealt with a high level of **confidentiality**. Your identity will remain anonymous and **will never appear on any reports of this research**. All your answers will be kept safe and secure with me only.

Who will have access to my answers?

All findings will be presented to my EdD supervisor at the IoE-UCL and will be presented in the form of a research report (thesis). However, your name **will not** be mentioned during the presentation of the findings or the writing-up of the research paper.

Is it only me who will take part in the research?

No. The sample will include the school principal, teachers, leaders; and 16 students from Grades 9-12.
For more information and details, you can visit the UCL website by clicking on the link below:
https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/ucl-general-research-participant-privacy-notice

Thank you,
Ghadeer Abu-Shamat

I may be contacted via email:

Appendix 6

Research Participant Consent Form

Parent Version

Kindly sign the form below in consent to your child's participation in the research project as explained in the information sheet.
If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask me before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

Research project title: Amplifying Student Voice and Moving Toward Student Leadership.
Researcher: Ghadeer Abu-Shamat
Supervisor's name: Dr Dina Mehmedbegović- Smith (d.mehmedbegovic@ucl.ac.uk)

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information and what will be expected of me. I have also had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that I may withdraw my child from the research project at any stage and this will not affect his/her status now or in the future.
- I understand that my child's name / identity will not identified and his /her answers will remain confidential.
- I understand that the data gathered in this study will be stored anonymously and securely. It will not be possible to identify my child's name in any publications.
- I understand that the recorded interview will be recorded for the research purpose only.
- I understand that data will be stored securely during the research process and will be destroyed at the end of research.
- I understand that I or my child may contact the researcher or supervisor if we require further information about the research.
- I am aware that I or my child may contact UCL's Data Protection Officer (data-protection@ucl.ac.uk) if we wish to lodge a complaint relating to his / her involvement in the research.

This is to confirm that permission is given to my child …… to participate in the research project as explained in the Research Information Sheet.

Parent's name: …… **Date:** …….

Parents' Signature: …….

I may be contacted via email:

Appendix 7

Research Participant Consent Form

Student Version

Kindly sign the form below in consent to your participation in the research project as explained in the information sheet.

If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask me before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

Research project title: Amplifying Student Voice and Moving Toward Student Leadership.
Researcher: Ghadeer Abu-Shamat
Supervisor's name: Dr Dina Mehmedbegović-Smith

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information and what will be expected of me. I have also had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that my name/ identity will not identify and my answers will remain confidential.
- I understand that my data gathered in this study will be stored anonymously and securely. It will not be possible to identify my name in any publications.
- I understand that the recorded interview will be recorded for the research purpose only.
- I understand the data will be stored securely during the research process and will be destroyed at the end of research.
- I understand the I may contact the researcher or supervisor if we require further information about the research.
- I am aware that I may contact UCL's Data Protection Officer (data-protection@ucl.ac.uk) if I wish to lodge a complaint relating to my involvement in the research.

This is to confirm that I..……(*your name*) will participate in the research project as explained in the Research Information Sheet.

Name: …… **Date:** ……
Signature: ……

I may be contacted via email:

Appendix 8

Research Participant Consent Form

Teacher/ Leader Version

Kindly sign the form below in consent to your participation in the research project as explained in the information sheet.

If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask me before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

Research project title: Amplifying Student Voice and Moving Toward Student Leadership.
Researcher: Ghadeer Abu-Shamat
Supervisor's name: Dr Dina Mehmedbegović- Smith (d.mehmedbegovic@ucl.ac.uk)

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information and what will be expected of me. I have also had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and this will not affect his/her status now or in the future.
- I understand that my name / identity will not be identified and my answers will remain confidential.
- I understand that the data gathered in this study will be stored anonymously and securely. It will not be possible to identify my name in any publications.
- I understand that the recorded interview will be recorded for the research purpose only.
- I understand that data will be stored securely during the research process and will be destroyed at the end of research.
- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisor if we require further information about the research.
- I am aware that I may contact UCL's Data Protection Officer (data-protection@ucl.ac.uk) if I wish to lodge a complaint relating to his / her involvement in the research.

This is to confirm that I..…… *(your name)* agree to participate in the research project as explained verbally and in the Research Information Sheet.

Name: ……. **Date:** …….

Signature: …….

I may be contacted via email:

Appendix 9

Interview Protocol – Headteacher

Introduction

Thank you for your time and for accepting my invitation to participate in my research. I am a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Education- University College London (IoE-UCL). I am conducting a research study about **amplifying student voice and moving toward student leadership.** In our interview today, I would like to discuss several topics to capture your perceptions and experiences of student voice and student leadership and how it might exist in your school, so there are no right or wrong answers. You were selected to participate in this study because you are currently the headteacher of an outstanding school for more than seven years, and you have been serving in this role for at least five years. The interview should last about 1 hour . Everything you say will be kept confidential; your name and school or organisation will not be associated with any specific comments or conclusions expressed in the study. You may be identified by position (e.g., headteacher), but I will use a pseudonym to refer to the school. I will be recording our interview today for transcription. I will not use your recording in any publication or presentation. The files containing the recording will be protected with a password. If you would like or prefer to choose a pseudonym to refer to you, please share it with me. If needed, I will contact you to provide you with an opportunity to review your transcript. If you would like me to turn off the recorder during the interview, let me know, and I will turn it off at any time. Otherwise, I would like you to feel comfortable enough to speak freely. If there is a question you do not feel comfortable answering, please let me know, and we can move on to the next question. Please let me know if you need me to repeat or explain a question.

Do you have questions before we start?

Can I have your permission to record the interview?

Questions:

1. How do you define student voice? **(RQ1)**
2. What experiences have shaped your understanding of student voice? **(RQ1)**
3. How have you used student voice in your role as a headteacher? **(RQ2)**
4. Are there opportunities in your school that amplify student voice? **(RQ2)**

If no,

- Can you explain why?

Look for: Challenges and factors that may hinder student voice.

If yes,

- What are the practices in your school that amplify student voice? **(RQ2)**
- What is your role as a school leader in these practices? **(RQ3)**
- How do you evaluate/ measure the effectiveness of such practices? **(RQ2)**
- Do you get the student feedback? How do you get it? **(RQ2)**
- How do you evaluate and act on the student feedback?
- Who is responsible or involved in the planning or organising student voice activities? **(RQ3)**

*Listen for/ and probe on if **not** mentioned:*

- *Structures and consistency (policies, initiatives, programmes, practices, procedures).*
- *Evaluating/ measuring tools*
- *Frequency of the practices/ activities*

5. How do you define student leadership? **(RQ1)**
6. Are there opportunities in your school that foster student leadership? **(RQ1)**
7. Do you see a relationship between student voice and student leadership? **(RQ1)**
8. What practices of student voice do you believe have the most impact on student leadership? Why? **(RQ1)**
    - Can you give examples?
9. What kind of student leadership practices should be fostered at the school level? **(RQ1)**
10. As a school leader, do you think that student voice is one of the priorities you need to support? Why? **(RQ3)**
11. Do you involve all the students in the student voice activities? **(RQ2)**

If yes,

- *Do you have a system in place?*

If no,

- *Is it limited for a specific group? Age? Stage? Grades?*

12. What barriers do you see that hinder student voice at your school level?

13. How do you support your teachers/ leaders in potential student voice efforts? **(RQ3)**
    - *How have you supported a teacher who is unwilling to encourage student voice?*
    - *What systems are in place to provide support?*
    - *Describe the obstacles that might exist.*

Conclusion

14. What impact has the use of student voice in your school had on your students? **(RQ3)**
15. Do you think school leaders and educators should support student voice? Why? **(RQ3)**

Appendix 10

Interview Protocol – Senior Leaders/ Teachers

Introduction

Thank you for your time and for accepting my invitation to participate in my research. I am a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Education- University College London (IoE-UCL). I am conducting a research study about **amplifying student voice and moving toward student leadership.** In our interview today, I would like to discuss several topics to capture your perceptions and experiences of student voice and student leadership and how it might exist in your school, so there are no right or wrong answers. You were selected to participate in this study because you are currently working in an outstanding school as rated by the inspection board (DSIB) in Dubai. The interview should last for 1 hour. Everything you say will be kept confidential; your name and school or organisation will not be associated with any specific comments or conclusions expressed in the study. You may be identified by position (e.g., senior leader / teacher), but I will use a pseudonym to refer to the school. I will be recording our interview today for transcription. I will not use your recording in any publication or presentation. The files containing the recording will be protected with a password. If you would like or prefer to choose a pseudonym to refer to you, please share it with me. If needed, I will contact you to provide you with an opportunity to review your transcript. If you would like me to turn off the recorder during the interview, let me know, and I will turn it off at any time. Otherwise, I would like you to feel comfortable enough to speak freely. If there is a question you do not feel comfortable answering, please let me know, and we can move on to the next question. Please let me know if you need me to repeat or explain a question.

Do you have questions before we start?

Can I have your permission to record the interview?

Questions:

16. How do you define student voice? **(RQ1)**
17. What experiences have shaped your understanding of student voice? **(RQ1)**
18. Are there opportunities in your school/ classrooms that amplify student voice? **(RQ2)**

If no,

- Can you explain why?

Look for: Challenges and factors that may hinder student voice.

If yes,

- What are some ways you have used student voice in your classroom? **(RQ2)** ***(for teachers)***
- What are the practices in your school that amplify student voice? **(RQ2)**

- How do you evaluate/ measure the effectiveness of such practices? **(RQ2)**
- What student voice activities were the most challenging to implement in your classroom / or across the school? **(RQ2)**

*Listen for/ and probe on if **not** mentioned:*

- *Structures and consistency (policies, initiatives, programmes, practices, procedures).*
- *Evaluating/ measuring tools.*
- *Frequency of the practices/ activities.*

19. How do you define student leadership? **(RQ1)**
20. What kind student leadership activities do you implement in your school/ classroom as a teacher? **(RQ1)**
21. From your experience, do you see a relationship between student voice and student leadership? **(RQ1)**

If yes,

- What practices of student voice had the most impact on student leadership? Why? **(RQ1)**
- Can you give examples?

If no,

- Can you explain?

22. Do you think that student voice is one of the priorities for students' learning? Why? **(RQ3)**
23. Do you involve all the students in the student voice activities? **(RQ3)**

If yes,

- How?

*Listen for/ and probe on if **not** mentioned:*

- *Structures and consistency (policies, initiatives, programmes, practices, procedures).*

If no,

- Why?

*Listen for/ and probe on if **not** mentioned:*

- *Student interests, student engagement, opportunities.*

24. What barriers do you see that hinder student voice at your school level or inside the classrooms? **(RQ2)**
25. How does your school support student voice implementation across the school? **(RQ3)**
    - *What systems are in place to provide support?*
    - *Describe the obstacles that might exist.*

Conclusion

26. What are the main benefits of student voice activities? **(RQ3)**

27. What is the best thing about your school's student voice that you believe another school would want to know and implement to amplify student voice? **(RQ3)**

Appendix 11

Students' Questionnaire
Pre-interview questions
High School Students
Grades 9-12

To be conducted before interviewing the students using Google form

Introduction

Thank you for your time and for accepting my invitation to participate in my research. I am a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Education- University College London (IoE-UCL). I am conducting a research study about **amplifying student voice and moving toward student leadership.** I would like you to fill this survey to capture your perceptions and experiences of student voice and student leadership and how it might exist in your school, so there are no right or wrong answers. After the survey, I will conduct a 30 -45 min interview with students. Your responses in this survey will be kept confidential; your name and school or organisation will not be associated with any specific comments or conclusions expressed in the study.

Questions:

1- How do you define student voice? **(RQ1)**
2- Is your voice heard by your teachers, headteacher and school leaders inside and outside the classroom? If yes, how? Can you give examples? If no, explain. **(Context)**
3- Does your school provide you with student voice opportunities? **(RQ2)**
   Yes
   No
   If **yes**, how?
   If **no**, why do you think so?
4- List the student voice activities provided by your school? (**RQ2)**
5- Have you had an opportunity to participate in Student Voice activities provided by your school? **(RQ2)**
   Yes
   If yes, how?
   If no,
   Why?
6- What impact did your participation in Student Voice activities have on you as an individual? **(RQ2 + RQ3)**
7- How did your participation in Student Voice activities impact your school community? **(RQ2 + RQ3)**
8- Does your school offer opportunities to develop your leadership skills? **(RQ1)**

Yes
No

9- What activities helped developed your leadership skills? **(RQ1)**

10- Does your school involve all the students in Student Voice and Student Leadership activities? **(context)**
Yes
No

11- Are you involved in any decision-making process at your school? **(RQ2)**
If yes, can you give an example.
If no, why do you think so?

12- What suggestions do you have to raise Student Voice in schools? **(Conclusion)**

Appendix 12

Students' Questions
Focus Group
High School Students
Grades 9-12

The questions based on the survey that was conducted by the students.

Thank you for your time and for accepting my invitation to participate in my research. I am a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Education- University College London (IoE-UCL). I am conducting a research study about **amplifying student voice and moving toward student leadership.** I would like you to fill this survey to capture your perceptions and experiences of student voice and student leadership and how it might exist in your school, so there are no right or wrong answers. After the survey, I will conduct a 30 -45 min interview with students. Your responses in this survey will be kept confidential; your name and school or organisation will not be associated with any specific comments or conclusions expressed in the study.

Questions:

13- How do you define student leadership? **(RQ1)**
14- How can you differentiate between student voice and student leadership? **(RQ1)**
15- To what extend do you think, student voice and student leadership are related? **(RQ1)**
16- All students who filled the survey confirmed that your voice is heard. Is it only heard? Do the school leaders take actions based on your voice?
17- In the survey, majority of students mentioned that the students are involved in the decision-making process. Is it a consistent and systematic process? **(RQ1)**
18- Some of the student voice activities that students mentioned in the survey: Student council, class council, POD, assemblies. Can you explain more about the activities? **(RQ2)**
19- What is circle time and house system? And how such activities foster your leadership skills? **(RQ2)**
20- What is the role of head girl/ head boy?
    Look for:
    - *Impact*
    - *Roles and responsibility*
    - *Systems*
21- Do you think that such activities might affect your academics?
    Look for:
    - the impact on academics *"I used to take part but now I don't so that I can focus on academics".*

22- Students mentioned that **not** all students are involved in the activities. Based on what are they selected? **Context**

23- Have you been involved in research? Are you considered as researchers or co-researchers to help in school improvement?
Look for:
- how school leaders listen to and learn with students to improve school?

24- There were many suggestions to raise student voice in schools, why do you think school leaders should foster and support student leadership and student voice? **(RQ3)**

Appendix 13

Invitation to participate in the research (sample email)

From: Abu Shamat, Ghadeer <
Sent: Saturday, May 14, 2022 10:34 AM
To: [redacted]
Cc:
Subject: Invitation for research participation: Informed consent sheet

Dear [redacted]

I hope you are keeping well and enjoying your break!

I am writing to you to invite you to participate in my research titled:

"Amplifying Student Voice and Moving Toward Student Leadership"

Kindly find attached the details of the research as detailed in the information sheet for your reference.

If you accept to participate, please sign the consent form attached at the end of the sheet. You can sign it and send the electronically signed form.

Please let me know your availability in the coming few days. What about Monday 16.5 at 10 am?

If you have any further questions about this research, please feel free to contact me.

Warm Regards,
Ghadeer

Appendix 14

UCL Data Protection Registration Number

From: Crouch, Spense [redacted] on behalf of Finance.Data Protection <data-protection@ucl.ac.uk>
Sent: 26 November 2021 14:00
To: Abu Shamat, Ghadeer
Subject: 20211126 Email confirm Z6364106 2021 11 62

Hi,

Thank you for your application to register with the Data Protection Office. I think the link to the privacy notice should be expanded within the attached information sheets (see below).

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our 'general' privacy notice:

For participants in research studies, click here

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices.

The lawful basis that will be used to process your personal data is: 'Public task' for personal data.

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

Please consider, update and return for our records.

With this action in mind, I am pleased to confirm that this project is now registered under, reference No **Z6364106/2021/11/62 social research** in line with UCL's Data Protection Policy.

You may quote this reference on your Ethics Application Form, or any other related forms.

You should make arrangements as early as possible for the secure long-term storage of your data, taking into account any specific requirements of your department or funder. UCL staff and PhD students can use the UCL Research Data Repository while undergraduate and Masters students may want to ask their supervisors about the Open Education Repository. The Research Data Management team can be contacted at lib-researchsupport@ucl.ac.uk.

UCL staff can contact the Records Office records.office@ucl.ac.uk to arrange for the long-term secure storage of their research records.

For data protection enquiries, please contact the data protection team at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk

For ethics enquiries, please contact the ethics team at ethics@ucl.ac.uk.

Regards,

Spenser Crouch
Data Protection & Freedom of Information Administrator & Chief Web Editor
Legal Services, UCL | Gower Street | London | WC1E 6BT
Email: s[redacted]ucl.ac.uk Data Protection: data-protection@ucl.ac.uk FOI: foi@ucl.ac.uk.
Telephone: 0203 108 8764 (internal 58764)

General enquiries. Please first check our FAQs as your question is likely to be answered there. If your question isn't answered in the FAQs, we aim to respond to all enquiries within 3 working days.

Please note I am currently working from home (except Thursday's) and best contacted via email.

Appendix 15

UCL Ethics approval letter

Dear Ghadeer,

Thank you for sending in your ethics application.

I am writing to confirm that ethical approval has been granted by the UCL Institute of Education for your doctoral research project titled:

Amplifying Student Voice and Moving Toward Student Leadership

This ethical approval has been granted from 8th February 2022 and the document you provided has been saved to your student file.

Please can you also upload the approved ethics form to your UCL Research Student Log https://researchlog.grad.ucl.ac.uk/.

I wish you all the best for your forthcoming research.

Regards,
Ms Michelle Brown
Programme Administrator

Appendix 16

Data Collection Schedule

Participants:

- Headteacher: 1
- Grades 9-12 students: 13 students
- Middle leaders/ Teacher:1
- Senior leaders: 2
- Senior Leader/ Teacher: 1

Data collection tool	Participant (s)	Date	Status	Transcripts
Students' Questionnaire	Grade 9-12 students	Mon- Tue 14-15.2.22	*Completed*	
Focused group interview **Face-to-Face**	Grade 9-12 students	Wednesday 16.2 8:30 am	*Completed*	*Completed*
Semi-structured interview **Virtual Zoom & Teams**	Headteacher -HD	Friday 22.4 11:00 am	*Completed*	*Completed*
	SL Deputy - SL 1	Friday 13.5 2:00 pm	*Completed*	*Completed*
	SL Deputy -SL2	Friday 13.5 3:00 pm	*Completed*	*Completed*
	Supervisor / Teacher HS SL3	Monday 16.5 5:30 pm	*Completed*	*Completed*
	Teacher HS -T1	Monday 6.6 5:30 pm	*Completed*	*Completed*

Appendix 17
Interview Transcript -Sample (1)

Date and Time: Friday 22.4.22 11:00 am
Key: I: Interviewee

Researcher - GS: [00:00:00.96] All right. So, I'm asking you the first question. How do you define student voice from your own perspective as a school leader?

I: Headteacher: [00:00:09.51] Sure to my mind, student voice is when students are able to articulate what they are experiencing and either endorse it or ask or request for something to be done differently. And when their recommendation is taken on board by the management, giving due consideration and [00:00:30.00] then actioned.

Researcher - GS: [00:00:32.40] Okay. Perfect. And what experiences have you shaped your understanding of student voice as a school leader?

I: Headteacher: [00:00:40.98] So initially I have to say that we've moved in our understanding of student voice. Initially it was more of a guided student voice, for want of a better word, because, you know, we had a prefectural system which was different and which were a few empowered to make all the decisions and did everything. But now that we've gone flat in our in our leadership structure, we find that our own understanding of student voices has evolved. So, I think, to my mind, are shifting in the way we went when we created our new vision statement, and when we when we flattened our student leadership structure, that is what shifted our understanding of student voice.

Researcher - GS: [00:01:26.16] Just what do you mean by flattened or flat structure?

I: Headteacher: [00:01:30.58] So now we're following the holacracy model where we don't have a head boy, we don't have a head girl, we don't have any house captains, no prefix. Instead of that, we've got councils and every council, every house builds a house system, right? So, we've linked the house system and the council system and every house, let's say Pegasus House will have one member being represented on the council. So instead of having eight prefix or eight house captains, now we've got 96 boards.

Researcher - GS: [00:02:02.83] More widened, and how have you used student voice in your role as a head teacher? You mentioned about the structure and the way you changed it, but do you, for example, meet with them regularly? What kind of decisions have they made? What kind of role you feel they are taking at school level?

I: Headteacher: [00:02:22.81] So they have a voice in everything and they know it. So, we have an escalation route for them as well. So, we have something called circle time where they express themselves. They can go to their supervisors with concerns they have or questions they have or anything that they want to raise. We invite them into leadership team meetings so when they've got, you know, an idea to pitch, that's a different pathway.

When they have a complaint to make, that's a different pathway. So, we because we've got a tiered system for escalating concerns, student voice is heard very, very quickly and actioned. And they're also sitting on they also are responsible for news, reporting of news and creating of newsletters and interacting. So, we have the class council system where every month we have the two students of the class teacher and two parents. They meet in every section from grade 1 to grade 12, and they discuss the concerns in the class and the students take the minutes of the meeting.

Researcher - GS: [00:03:27.25] Perfect. So, you have a system or frequency of number of meetings conducted across the year. Do you have something in writing like standard operating procedure or is something part of the school culture? How does it work?

I: Headteacher: [00:03:39.04] So we don't have it as part of student voice, but we have as part of our different processes. So, for example, as part of our governance structure, we've got the class councils and that is documented because we believe that students are also governors. At the end of the day, they should have student representatives. So, they are at the class level, they are they are represented. We don't have them on the local advisory board and I don't plan to bring them because there are other avenues for their input to be sought.

Researcher - GS: [00:04:05.56] So you mentioned about the way you are amplifying the student voice in the school. So, what kind of practices in terms of you mentioned student council, but it's not any more student council, right?

I: Headteacher: [00:04:20.05] It is. It is.

Researcher - GS: [00:04:20.95] But so what are the practices that amplify student voice and give opportunity for the students to participate?

I: Headteacher: [00:04:28.73] So we've got for example, we've got house meetings that happen in structured house meetings that happen every week. We have class council meetings every month. We've got challenge-based learning in the middle school. So, where students meet in and they pull out areas that they are concerned with in order to construct and build whatever activism they want to do. They do it through the challenge-based learning, and that is escalated. So, we've got a I mean, it's a it's a progression pathway. So, in the grade nine and ten, they do the EIB in 11 and 12, they do project PRISM on the IB side, they've got gas and EE. So, we've got different mechanisms like which student voice gives rise to student activism and student.

Researcher - GS: [00:05:16.07] So are you taking part of this mechanism or what is your role as a school leader in all of these practices and activities? Where are you based on this?

I: Headteacher: [00:05:24.80] Oh, student councils. I go in randomly from time to time to house meetings. I go in randomly from time to time. So, it's not obviously it's not a very structured way, but I move around so that I get a gist of what's happening. We have circle

time with students. I myself lead one circle in grade nine among grade nine students. Every week we have 40 minutes of circle time where different matters are discussed so CBL for example pI go in for quality assurance and making sure you know, so my role differs depending on the kind of activity it is.

Researcher - GS: [00:06:03.44] And how do you evaluate as a school leader or school leaders and evaluate or measure the effectiveness of such practices? Do you have a measurement tool that you feel like, yeah, it's successful?

I: Headteacher: [00:06:18.62] So we have feedback surveys that we conduct from time to time on different matters. So, in fact, our council system evolved because of a response to a survey. So, we have different mechanisms by which we take different occasions, where we have different surveys. Of course, we use the past survey information as well, but internally whenever we see so it's more of an agile survey that we use. So, when we see there's a concern or we see there's something that we need feedback on, we immediately run a survey. Students are now used to these surveys, sometimes a three-question survey, sometimes it's a five-question survey, sometimes a ten question, sometimes a two-question survey. But we need a very quick input from students. So, and even on impact of what we're doing. So, it was do you find this effective or was this useful to you? Things like that.

Researcher - GS: [00:07:08.42] And the school leaders themselves, the ones you they are working like 65 you mentioned or 67 those leaders, they have impact on school improvement and the school community, right?

I: Headteacher: [00:07:20.48] Yes. Is definitely.

Researcher - GS: [00:07:22.19] Yeah. This is. And how do you feel like it's definitely having an impact what kind of indicators you have.

I: Headteacher: [00:07:28.37] So we have three different ways in which we evaluate this impact. One is the number of initiatives the students come to us with. The second is the number of but the amount they're participating in, in both internal as well as external events. And the third is the number of, you know, competitions that they've been winning, participating and winning.

Researcher - GS: [00:07:51.05] And who is in charge, who is organising these initiatives and activities with the students? Of course, the students they initiated. But who is in charge? Who is the direct contact?

I: Headteacher: [00:08:00.26] So it depends on under which umbrella it comes. If it's, for example, entrepreneurship, then we have Ms.. x, who's an assistant dean and entrepreneurship and innovation. We visit with academics. It comes under the dean's department. If it's to do with social outreach, then it comes under Ms.. Judy now, who's the head of the council. So, we have council heads as well. So, if it's a council related

activity, then it comes into the council head. If it's anything to do with social entrepreneurship, it's y and x.

Researcher - GS: [00:08:30.17] How do you define student leadership? We talk we spoke about student voice. What about student leadership from your own perspective?

I: Headteacher: [00:08:43.85] So to my mind and in fact, we just had an investiture for our grade five where we said, you know, we introduced them to the councils and we said we'd make them take a pledge. So, what was your question again? Student Leader So to my mind, yeah, as I was telling them, a student leader, one who first leads themselves and number two without too much of direction, takes initiative and sees a project through right to the end with a proper, you know, evaluation of impact that has had and then goes through the reflection cycle. So, I think all leaders, one who influences impact on a large scale, and that's what we always tell our children. But first they need to lead themselves and then they need to see something through from initiated till the time they finish it. and the impact on the larger group of people.

Researcher - GS: [00:09:33.29] And do you find out or do you see a relationship between student voice and student leadership?

I: Headteacher: [00:09:40.16] Direct correlation.

Researcher - GS: [00:09:41.54] Yeah. Direct. And what do you think the practice of student voice that you believe that has most impact on student leadership?

I: Headteacher: [00:09:52.72] So I believe that when there are avenues for student voice to be expressed and heard and actioned, that has the maximum impact on student leadership. And that's when the students begin to believe that they can create a change or an impact in whatever areas are looking at. Like this morning I had four boys come to me because they're very enthusiastic about aviation and they wanted, you know, the whole school to be excited about aviation. We said, no, we can't have. So, we don't always listen to everything they say, but we guide them in terms of, you know, what is the rational thing to do. And so, they wanted so we said, you can have your club only after you've demonstrated that you've got at least 50 people interested in what you're saying. And in order to demonstrate that, you need to do one, two, three, four things. So those are the kind of guidelines that we give them when they are sure that sometimes children are not sure. And just because they've said it doesn't mean it has to happen. So that is our role then as senior leaders and educators to guide them towards, you know, seeing their plan to fruition.

Researcher - GS: [00:10:53.74] Perfect. And you gave example already because I wanted to ask your example, but what kind of student leadership practices should be fostered at the school level, not only at your school and in general as a school leader, you believe this is a must have in any school to foster student leadership?

I: Headteacher: [00:11:11.83] So I think our practice fosters in inculcating self-belief in students and then empowering them and equipping them with competencies that they will need to succeed in whatever they choose to execute. And student competencies are very clearly defined. Student leadership competencies are clearly defined. So, in fact, we're having a student conclave, leadership conclave, where every student in grade 11 is going through all of the leadership competencies and getting trained for leadership competencies, because only then we believe they can be successful in their council system.

Researcher - GS: [00:11:46.24] So this means as a school leader, you think that the student voice is one of the priorities that should be at the school level?

I: Headteacher: [00:11:54.48] I think it's not only a priority, it's an essential component to have for effective leadership. Otherwise, you'll just have yes mam. Yes. Yes, sir. Yes, ma'am. Three bags full, ma'am. You know everything you said, no one will challenge. So, we teach them to respectfully challenge and we challenge them all the time. So, it's a two-way street. It's not that we challenge them and don't expect to be challenged, but we expect that they come in and respectfully challenge us as well.

Researcher - GS: [00:12:16.86] So do you involve all the students across the school and the student voice activities?

I: Headteacher: [00:12:33.57] So they have the option, and then they have avenues where every student is exercising that or not depends on some exercises at the classroom level, something that the grade level and some at the house level, some at the council level, some at the school level. So, because we've got so many avenues for them, we do believe that at least 90, 95% of our students are exercising.

Researcher - GS: [00:12:57.24] Perfect. And this is from KG up to grade 12, right?

I: Headteacher: [00:13:01.56] Yes.

Researcher - GS: [00:13:03.24] And what barriers do you see that hinder student voice at your school level or at any school level? You feel like this is a barrier.

I: Headteacher: [00:13:12.66] So I think when students who come in from a different culture, a different background, a different educational experience, when they come in and say a middle school or a grade five and they don't, so we have to start building all over again. So, we build our students up. But I think one of the barriers we face is that somebody comes in with their own ideologies or their own, you know, and that may not match. So, we have we've had in the past people come in with a very authoritarian version of leadership. Yeah, it's my way or the highway. This is how it is. I'm the person in charge, so it has everything else to go on what I see so that including teachers who come in late, I mean, who come in newer teachers to bring them in and get them understanding how the school works. I think that's one barrier. Another barrier I feel is students have

confidence when that is lacking. We believe that is a strong, big barrier. And so, there's a lot of effort we make in in improving student self-confidence.

Researcher - GS: [00:14:11.55] So you mentioned about the students and you mentioned about the teachers and sometimes leaders, by the way, especially joining new to the culture and the system. How have you supported a teacher who is unwilling to encourage a student voice? Sometimes they are resistant. So how as a leader would encourage her or work with her?

I: Headteacher: [00:14:30.21] So I think two things. One is that initial conversations and at every meeting, every point clarifying the school is a vision and purpose. And you know what the school stands for? I do that at every meeting. I find an opportunity to emphasise the vision of the school and what we believe in and with student voice being one of them. We still even now have some, you know, some people on who will resist. But I think through constant dialogue and conversation and the other is asking them to lead on student voice projects themselves. So, when they lead on a student voice project, they have no option but to listen.

Researcher - GS: [00:15:06.96] Absolutely. But usually from your experience, why those teachers may resist or they're not willing to? Student Voice What reasons do they have? I know that different culture, but maybe sometimes it's coming from somewhere as educators.

I: Headteacher: [00:15:22.20] I just think it's the old timers who, you know, believe in the old authoritarian system. It's the youngsters who come in, they're very open and they are very amicable. And it's but it's the old timers and there are very few of them left now. But, you know, they're very rigid in their thinking and they don't, you know, it's how they were brought up and they just see that as.

Researcher - GS: [00:15:41.46] What impact has the use of student voice in your school had on your students and you feel you're very proud of?

I: Headteacher: [00:15:52.62] So when we see that our students are confident about expressing themselves at any forum and they're not afraid to be contrarian, they're not afraid to challenge the status quo, and we've seen that happened right across. So, it's ...We just sit back and say, okay, we've done our job at that point in time. And when we feel that it's not happening with a few students, then we take them under her wing. Whoever sees it, especially the leadership team, we take them on our wing and we actually give them opportunities to challenge the status quo. And we tell them, if you don't respectfully challenge, no one's going to take you seriously because yes sir three bags full. So, to everything, no one's ever going to want you on their team.

Researcher - GS: [00:16:29.64] Absolutely. The final concluding question. Do you think school leaders and educators should support student voice in their schools as well? And why?

I: Headteacher: [00:16:44.38] The answer is yes, they should, because. And why? Because we are nurturing the citizens of tomorrow. And if we are not training them to make their voices heard when it matters, I think we'll be failing in our job. So, I think that every educator's role is to empower and inspire children to really find the first, find their voice, and then to use it effectively.

Researcher - GS: [00:17:06.43] Perfect. Thank you so much.

The End of The Interview

Appendix 18
Interview Transcript -Sample (2)

Key:
Interviewee Senior Leader (1): I - SL (1)

Researcher - GS: [00:00:00.09] How do you define a student voice from your own perspective as a senior leader?

I-SL1: [00:00:14.20] If I have to define student voice, I would say that where students are given opportunity to share their thinking and their perspective and they are being heard in terms of whatever the decisions as a school, what we make, whether it's teaching and learning or other administrative purposes. Every time we take the inputs of student and we act on it and that's how whether it's for any parent group or if we're making a change in the school structure or so, if you are taking the inputs of student, I think we are giving an opportunity. And that's the student voice, which I think of.

Researcher - GS: [00:00:56.62] All right. Very good. Thank you. So, is there a unified definition across your school that everyone knows about student voice at the school level?

I-SL1: [00:01:09.35] There is no structured definition as such as of now, but definitely we have an open-door policy. In the school where any student starting from the principal to the vice-principal to the supervisor, they can come and share whatever they want. So maybe it [00:01:30.00] is not a written diktat, but this open-door policy itself shows that we want to listen to you.

Researcher - GS: [00:01:37.87] And what experiences have you shaped your understanding of student voice as a leader in a school? What experiences have shaped your understanding based on what you build? This is this is the understanding of student voice.

I-SL1: [00:01:53.23] Basically over the years, the education system has changed. And initially it was more a teacher led type of education. And then as with the evolution of education, we felt that students should be given more opportunities to do their own learning, the means to evolve their own learning. And that's how it led to giving more opportunities for students in everything, whatever we do.

Researcher - GS: [00:02:27.37] So what kind of opportunities you're talking about in [00:02:30.00] the school? At the school level, you mentioned something about open-door policies so they can come and express their thoughts. But what are opportunities that you have in your school and the classrooms that amplify the student voice across the school?

I-SL1: [00:02:48.16] Like if you take our system initially in our school, we had a prefectural body which had a head boy and head girl at the top, followed by a set of prefects, which are very few in numbers. Okay, but over the last two years, we have removed ourselves

from that structure and we follow Holacracy model, which means that giving more opportunities for students to become leaders. So, we call them now pledge officers on duty, like we have 12 councils. Every council from the House has those pledge officers on duty.

Researcher - GS: [00:03:37.48] And when did you apply this model?

I-SL1 [00:03:40.21] About two years back.

Researcher - GS: [00:03:41.29] And what impact did you notice?

I-SL1: [00:03:44.88] The opportunities given? That means rather than only a handful of people taking decisions. Now, there are more people in the forefront to take and lead decisions, whether it's house wise or a school wise, like there are 12 councils now. Each council has a pledge officer on duty. There are about eight of them. So, eight into 12, there are no more 96 instead of a handful, ten or 12. And this is not only at the senior most level, it is happening at a middle school, grade eight and grade five. So, in grade five, which is the highest in the primary school, grade eight in the middle and grade 12. So, we are having these leadership opportunities at these three levels and then it is cascaded down. So, our plan in the near future is not only for these grades, but for every grade to have these pledge officers on duty. So, for a particular grade, we have those. And so, there are more people involved in taking decisions for their grade and student body.

Researcher - GS: [00:04:52.93] So now the advantage, as I can hear that involving more students, which makes more advantage and you're giving more opportunities for bigger number of students, if I understood correctly. But what was the impact of having such a role for the students? And how did you evaluate, measure the effectiveness of such structure and such practices and decision-making?

I-SL1: [00:05:16.72] So what is happening? Because initially there were a few numbers, all decisions were coming through them. There are more people who are thinking differently. So in terms of quantitative, we have not done anything, but we plan to do a survey with these people. That is because we do surveys on teaching and learning because that is another form of student voice. Yeah, but we conduct very often term wise yearly on teaching and learning where every child gives them, give us their opinion about teaching and learning how. So that is a form of student voice... Survey whenever like we changed the timings for, we have say an extended day we want to have and we want to have a nice programme. So, we didn't do a survey with everybody. We took groups of students and ask them if this is the plan, what do you feel? And based all those decisions we try and implement to the best of our ability. So that is one thing. Student survey is one thing and we impact if you tell me quantitatively, we don't have any quantitative data of the impact, but by and large, there's definitely more number of children who are participating in taking decisions.

Researcher - GS: [00:06:36.79] Okay. All right.

I-SL1: [00:06:37.87] But definitely this is in the car to find the impact in the future.

Researcher - GS: [00:06:42.13] You mentioned let me go back to the structure and the more number of students now are involved in decision-making process. So, what is the frequency of such for example, activities, meetings. Any certain pattern having these meetings with the leaders or those who are involved in such activities?

I-SL1: [00:07:07.07] We planned for twice in a month with me. We are, of course, a little tight on time. But we said the House meetings where because these councils run through the houses, because we have four houses, girls and boys. So, these councils run through the houses and pledge officers who are a part of the houses. That means I'll give you an example. Suppose you have an academic council. We have four houses, but there are four boys and four girls from those houses from grade 12 who are the pledge officers. So, during the House meetings twice a month, they talk to the students, have strategies in place, what is the way they plan things for their houses? So, when you plan things from the houses means it is reaching to all. All this is basically for more of the middle and senior school for the primary school grade fives, the frequency is not as much as in the senior school.

Researcher - GS: [00:08:09.76] Oh, okay. So, let me ask you now other part of the questions, which is how do you define student leadership? You spoke about student voice and the meaning of student voice. How do you define student leadership?

I-SL1: [00:08:22.89] Indirectly both are interconnected. So, when I talk of student voice through student voice, we develop student leadership. So, that is one way of looking at things for student leadership. Initially, we had somebody at the helm with the head boy, head girl who would pose the key factors for anything as a school we used to do. We used to reach out to that. But now what is happening as a school? We are reaching out to suppose there's a cultural programme. We are reaching out to the Cultural Council if there is an academic issue in terms of assessment. So, we are reaching out to different, different groups of people. So, these are the people who are developing more leadership qualities in terms of student voice also.

Researcher - GS: [00:09:13.47] So, for example, you mentioned the houses system and you don't have the captains anymore. But then what kind of student leadership activities do you implement across the school and inside the classrooms?

I-SL1: [00:09:32.31] So in terms of like through these councils, if there is an initiative, there are a lot of initiatives with children come up. Now, recently, a student came up with a "aim to frame".

Researcher - GS: [00:09:48.48] What is it? Sorry, what is the initiative?

I-SL1: [00:09:51.63] Aim to frame.

Researcher - GS: [00:09:52.92] Aim to frame.

I-SL1: [00:09:54.24] Because what she wanted to do is she wanted to do a collection drive to collect the spectacle frames.

Researcher - GS: [00:10:04.52] Okay.

I-SL1: [00:10:05.52] Lot of people, they change their glasses and they don't know what to do with the power and all. They leave it over there. They throw it away. And there are a lot of organisations they need these frames. Poor people can't afford it. So, what they did is, though they started the film, so they kept outside the supervisor's office boxes grade wise. So, children and parents who have the old frame, they come and deposit it to collect that. Now, there was a before that there was another drive where they collecting stationery.

Researcher - GS: [00:10:39.36] Excellent.

I-SL1: [00:10:40.50] So what is happening in India, there are a lot of NGOs and all the poor people. They don't have stationery, sharpener and a pencil and a rubber. And there are many people who don't use those nowadays because they're using technology. They don't use pencils and all. So, if there are spare pencils and all, they come and deposit and that has been transferred to some poor country. So, these are drives that come to them.

Researcher - GS: [00:11:04.20] Hmm. Yeah.

I-SL1: [00:11:04.98] I don't know if you've heard something called "adopt a grandparent". One of the groups started. Adopted Grandparent means there are poor people who there's nobody to talk to them. Nobody to talk to them. So, either their children have left them or the children are not there with them. They don't know. So, these children have formed a group and every weekend they through an NGO they talk to those grandparents for an hour and all they talk to them. And they feel happy that they are like the grandchildren. So, they feel happy that they are talking. So, these see, these are the kinds of initiatives that come through. And it's not always that people who are initiating, it's good. There is one kind of leadership, but there are children who are taking part also. They are also learning through these initiatives.

Researcher - GS: [00:12:02.59] Yeah, absolutely.

I-SL1: [00:12:04.03] I may not be a part, but I've learned so much because the children are coming with these traits.

Researcher - GS: [00:12:08.53] Absolutely interesting. And this is aimed at just to confirm its aim to frame.

Researcher - GS: [00:12:17.47] Yeah, that's amazing. So, in other words, as if you are saying that student leadership is more about taking initiatives.

I-SL1: [00:12:28.03] Initiatives and taking decisions about like academic. Now assessment, they don't like when you are doing a lot of tests so they come the academic council along with groups of people, they come and meet the teachers and say that we would like this type of assessments because the assessments we are not learning just before the exams, we are just learning enough and then we forget. How can we restructure our examination or the assessment process so they give us ideas? And based on those ideas recently we changed a little bit of our assessment pattern, doing more of project, doing more of research where there is more deeper understanding and learning of for children.

Researcher - GS: [00:13:08.56] When it comes to taking decisions on student leadership practices, to what extent you feel there is an impact on school improvement at the school level from these students?

I-SL1: [00:13:21.13] I think when like recently I gave you this example of that academic, assessment, definitely the restructuring of little bit of the assessment process has definitely impacted way of learning. So overall, the learning in the school becomes better. When you are talking about those drives: adopt a grandparent, the social and emotional skills of the students they improve when they when they do all these things. Directly there is an impact in a way. Like there's a Sports Council. Many people don't get to play the entire school because they're not good enough. It's the sports carnival. The sports carnival is somebody where anybody can go and play. So, we are giving more opportunities. So, they are thinking in terms of leaders, also the Sports Council members giving more opportunities for people.

Researcher - GS: [00:14:21.83] Okay. All right.

I-SL1: [00:14:23.38] And that has impacted in more people getting opportunities in the school.

Researcher - GS: [00:14:28.16] Absolutely. So, from your own perspective, what barriers do you see that hinder student voice at your school level or inside the classrooms or challenges you see?

I-SL1: [00:14:42.38] This hindrance as such? There is nothing, but there are children who, by nature, don't speak up.So it is a barrier for them. So as a school we are trying to give more opportunities, then they open up more. So, the idea of having more and more people coming up and sharing is because of that. So, it is those students. There's one student who is not very vocal, but they like to write it. And then I asked him, why don't you speak of you write so well? He says that when I write, I don't have the fear of criticism. But when I speak, I have that fear of criticism that somebody who is making judgement on me. Writing, I don't have that fear I'm just writing what my mind says. I don't have to see what I don't have to see people's facial expressions, what they are thinking, whether

they're liking making faces. So, I'm always thinking I'm conscious about that, but I'm writing. I don't have that fear. So, you see the how these people think.

Researcher - GS: [00:15:48.80] Absolutely. I totally agree with you when it comes to those students that they don't like to express themselves, whether vocally and sometimes writing, I wouldn't say passive, but this is their nature. Do you believe that the school or your school should involve all the students in student voice activities using different means or different ways just to make sure you're covering all the body of the students?

I-SL1: [00:16:17.15] It's like when it comes to maybe student survey and we need to do student survey group. We need intellectual thinking. These are the students who are very quiet, who don't are not vocal in the class. Maybe we can use those for doing the student surveys so they'll be more adept at giving good feedback. But those who are little vocal, we can use them in a different form of student voice. So, the student intellect and the way the man behaviour we can choose people and use as many people in the whole process of student voice.

Researcher - GS: [00:16:55.24] Yeah. And how do you see student voice when it comes to the students learning set up inside the classroom?

I-SL1: [00:17:01.90] Frankly, as of now, we are not there in terms of what we want when we always talk about personalised learning and when we can ... Like we have a success criteria, we always tell our teachers that when you create your success criteria, involve the students in creating success criteria, they have the learning intention. So, we are not there. We are trying as much as possible because when we now moving into the IB way, the PYP way, there are more opportunities for discussions and provocation and thinking, so there's more opportunity. So that is also leading to more student voice that they can express. What they are thinking is we are not limiting. There is more choice both which we give to students. They can choose how they want to give their outcomes, whether they want to write, whether they want to make a presentation. So, we are trying as much as possible, but it's not come to that level improving them.

Researcher - GS: [00:18:05.27] So do you think that student voice can be part of the teaching methodology of the teacher? In other words, or teaching strategies?

I-SL1: [00:18:14.66] That is the next step, which we want to look at students and teachers. And I think I was reading some article; they have some Democratic classroom practices. So, where teachers and children actually plan what they're going to do in the classroom.

Researcher - GS: [00:18:32.09] Yes. During specific time in the morning or specific lesson.

I-SL1: [00:18:36.14] This is what is there. This the teachers, I think that is the next step will be if you're moving towards more personalised learning involving that democratic classroom practices.

Researcher - GS: [00:18:46.31] You mentioned that you're still not there when it comes to the implementation or student voice activities inside the classroom. Is it because of teachers' nature? How do you define it? What's the barrier or challenge at the time being?

I-SL1: [00:19:04.82] Could be. One reason could be the teachers could be the teachers. Because as a teacher, depending on the nature of the teacher and the curriculum, what you're teaching is not the teacher per se, but definitely all the curriculum also prevents them to do what they want to actually. The constraint of time, the finishing syllabus, finishing this. So that could be one constraint, definitely the teacher, the curriculum, the portions holiday. So, they are also time that because when you have to give involved students there's a lot of time that you have to devote. The time could be that barrier though. If you don't have a structured curriculum and you can plan your own curriculum, I think that will give more opportunities for students if you don't have the constraint of time.

Researcher - GS: [00:20:03.83] Yeah, absolutely. So, from your own perspective as well, this is the concluding question what are the benefits of student voice activities from your experience at the school level?

I-SL1: [00:20:19.91] See, we come from a different generation and our thinking is slightly different from [00:20:30.00] the students who are living in this world, because they say that the children, every generation, are more intelligent than the previous generation.

I-SL1: [00:20:41.27] Their thinking their ideas. Okay. But that involves the teachers and allows teachers to think differently. Otherwise, we have a set pattern of things, so they give us a whole range of thinking patterns. So, yes, why don't you do this? Because they keep always challenging the status quo. Why can't we do what is wrong in this? We may sometimes tell them, okay, no, this is what you have to do. But then we go. When we go and reflect on it, we said there's a lot of merit in what they are saying. So, a lot of changes that happen is because of. At the end of the day, it is because of children we are here. So, and if they are happy in school. Definitely their learning will be better.

Researcher - GS: [00:21:31.64] Absolutely. You know, in the inspection report 2018-2019, it states that about your school. "The school is very successful in providing opportunities for students to express their opinions. As a result, more students are developing and sharing leadership responsibilities. For example, they are engaged in finding solutions to real-life problems". This was mentioned in the last report, right? Nothing was happening?

I-SL1: [00:22:04.03] Yes.

Researcher - GS: [00:22:04.04] So from that, I would like to ask you, what is the best thing about your school student voice that you believe another school would want to know and implement to amplify student voice and have as a good practice.

I-SL1: [00:22:19.67] You know, in involve students. See, we involve students in decision-making in a school. Like for instance, when we started our DSIB inspections, there were

different performance standards we were using and it will be involving the teachers. Then what we taught is then from the same group of different performance standards. And we made groups of students. So that means I'm looking at that. They make some look in the social personality, some looking at curriculum. So, what we are involving those. So, the more you involve students in different decision-making and then they formed a group and they used to go into classes and talk to them about teaching and learning, because we have noticed that when younger children listen to the older children, they relate to them more than teachers who are going and telling the same thing.

Researcher - GS: [00:23:17.51] Absolutely.

I-SL1: [00:23:18.44] Because they look up to them. So, these senior students go to the younger children and say, this is how I have learned, this is what I face. So, they relate to them more. So, if we can involve more students in decision-making involving like what teachers do normally, if we can involve more and more children in that automatically the outcome, what we are looking at and the impact definitely will be much more.

Researcher - GS: [00:23:44.06] Excellent. And you mentioned something which is, I believe, very important that you, for example, for the inspection framework performance indicators, you designated a certain group of students to look at certain areas. Can you give me a one example that you thought, oh, my God, the students made a huge difference because of their involvement in such a process?

I-SL1: [00:24:05.60] So like PS2 "social and personal development", when they gave us ideas on how we can involve more students and the personality talking to them, knowing about the culture and of the Islamic culture when you talk about PS2. So they basically the student by in large, they did the thinking of how we can go about and improve [the attitude of learning]. That's what I was telling when they go and talk in the class, no, about their attitudes towards teachers, attitudes towards learning. These are the modules which children went and did themselves. That’s how they learn they did that. What is that what you call that work? What type of learners they are? And they spoke about visual.

Researcher - GS: [00:24:53.24] Learning styles.

I-SL1: [00:24:56.07] Learners. If you if you are a visual and how do you do so? And then we did a lot of learning conclaves with them better. How do you learn better? How do you retain things? So, children doing for children, that was very impactful.

Researcher - GS: [00:25:16.04] Absolutely.

I-SL1: [00:25:16.88] 1 to 2 years because we didn't have inspections. But we definitely will start all this because we are in school now.

Researcher - GS: [00:25:24.62] Yeah. Now back to school. Back to normal.

Researcher - GS: [00:25:26.69] And one last question. Based on student survey, remember I conducted student survey and I had 25 students participating in this survey. So, a question was asked, what suggestion do you have to raise the student voice in schools? They mentioned creating I don't know who, but a student mentioned creating spaces for discussion is crucial whether organising think tanks, focus groups, debates or question time panels. The goal is to designate time and space to stimulating meaningful dialogue between staff and students. Open discussion where students feel able to speak honestly can be more productive than answering closed questions to what extent you feel this is relevant to your school?

I-SL1: [00:26:10.47] I definitely like the reason why we wanted to move into holacracy model, not limited to that is giving more opportunity for this exactly. That are more people who have open discussions with the school on different problems. But initially what was happening, it was limited to the factorial body, 10, 12 prefix. So, everything decision went to them. So, there was no open discussions with teachers and the children. And sometimes what happened is like leadership team and certain teachers are very open to discussion. There are some teachers who are not open to discussion, so they may refer to that then they should be heard by everybody in the school.

Researcher - GS: [00:26:56.48] Yeah, absolutely.

I-SL1: [00:26:58.61] It's not that only the principal or the vice-principal is listening to them. They expect that if I tell you as a teacher, you understand me also.

Researcher - GS: [00:27:08.15] Yeah.

I-SL1: [00:27:09.32] And when it reaches that state, I think that will be the ideal state when everybody interacts with. It happens a lot in the senior school, I think, because they're more mature, maybe in the middle school, looking at the nature of the students, they are different kind of students. So, you cannot listen to everybody. But I [00:27:30.00] think senior school is one primary school is also it's the middle school who are their hormonal changes.

Researcher - GS: [00:27:37.61] Yeah, of course they have, they have a special nature and they are still developing and growing. So, by the time we reach senior. Senior. It's a bit more settled.

I-SL1: [00:27:49.19] Across the world, I think this middle group is the group which is the most challenging in the school. Expectations from parents are different. Expectations from the children are different.

Researcher - GS: [00:27:58.79] And one last note that one of the students mentioned, I feel like there should be a fortnightly or monthly meeting with all students of the grade, with all of the senior leadership teachers to raise our problems. And we students should get a weekly update on our problems. I don't know to what extent you can relate. Do you have it in your school?

I-SL1: [00:28:20.12] We don't have a formalised thing of like there are assemblies and all, but not per se, like listening as a as a problem. That is what they want. We are suggesting if we have assemblies grade wise, but I think that's a good idea. Maybe since they have written a good idea for us to just give them 10 minutes and you share what you have. I think that's what they want.

Researcher - GS: [00:28:44.00] I think so. Yeah. And then update to update them.

I-SL1: [00:28:47.72] Okay. This is happening. But it doesn't happen as a grade wise level.

Researcher - GS: [00:28:52.52] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Maybe, maybe considering systems, not about the structure. It makes things maybe in a in a better place. All right. Any questions?

I-SL1: [00:29:05.06] No, I think. Yeah, but this is one good thing, which I think if children are feeling that maybe when they have the grade wise assembly grading, give them a 10 minutes opportunity to speak their mind. We do it more often with a senior and they are more vocal, but I think it's the middle and the primary school. We should look into them. That's a good.

Researcher - GS: [00:29:25.65] Thank you very much. I really appreciate your time.

End of Interview

Appendix 19
DSIB Inspection report

DUBAI Knowledge المعرفة [redacted]

2. Students' personal and social development, and their innovation skills

	KG	Primary	Middle	Secondary
Personal development	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

- Students, in all phases, show excellent behaviour and positive attitudes. They are committed to learning and demonstrate a high level of self-discipline. They are respectful, highly motivated and sensitive to the needs of their peers. Children in KG show independence in lessons, especially when expressing their ideas.
- In KG, children are most interested in applying their learning and in using their problem-solving skills rather than merely giving a correct answer. In a very few lessons in the lower grades, when teaching is not highly engaging, not all students consistently demonstrate high levels of self-discipline.
- The school is very successful in providing opportunities for students to express their opinions. As a result, more students are developing and sharing their leadership responsibilities. For example, they are engaged in finding solutions to real-life global problems.

	KG	Primary	Middle	Secondary
Understanding of Islamic values and awareness of Emirati and world cultures	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

- In KG, children have a clear understanding of Islamic values appropriate to their age and stage of development. Across the other three phases, students demonstrate an excellent understanding and high appreciation of Islamic values. Those in the upper phases are proud to organise and host a Ramadan Iftar for the school community.
- Students demonstrate an excellent knowledge and understanding of UAE culture and heritage. They participate in various Emirati cultural events and assemblies. In KG, children are immersed in books about the UAE as well as being participants in school celebrations.
- Students have a strong affiliation to their own cultures. They have an excellent understanding of other world cultures enhanced by their travel and by their involvement in the school's art and music programmes. French day in the primary phase, and Spanish day in the secondary phase, enable further development of students' world perspectives.

	KG	Primary	Middle	Secondary
Social responsibility and innovation skills	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding	Outstanding

- Students are proactive and highly involved in the life of the school and the wider community. Their contributions have a very positive impact on the development of their leadership skills. They show care and consideration for others and willingly support one another.
- Students have an excellent work ethic and demonstrate a high commitment to success. Innovative thinking is embedded in the culture of the school through the Thinking Centre where students can develop their ideas into concrete projects. Students are willing to take a risk and initiate new projects to solve problems.
- Students care for their school and the environment very well. They have a deep knowledge and understanding of sustainability and conservation, and they have their own practical ideas on how to care for the environment. They lead beach cleaning campaigns and an effective e-waste recycling initiative.

Appendix 20
Vision and mission

Vision Statement

Inspiring children to be positive change-makers.

Mission Statement

[redacted] aims to develop vibrant and exemplary students who are nurtured to achieve their optimal potential and work respectfully towards creating a more peaceful world. [redacted] provides opportunities for a holistic and all-inclusive student-focused learning environment (Dubai Inclusive Education Policy, Law No. (2), Executive Council Resolution No. 2) with an overarching emphasis on building mature and sensitive young people, with the cultural intelligence to make a positive difference in local and global communities.

Appendix 21
ISE's Documents

THE COUNCIL SYSTEM

Innovation has been the theme of all activities ISE, and the Student Leadership Structure has been no different.

Every year the Prefectorial Body provides feedback and suggestions on the functions and challenges of student leadership. One theme , this year referred to the understanding of Student Leadership by students. There were explicit requests by students to expand the activities for the student leadership body and even to expand the structure of the Student Leadership Body. As a result, 3 sessions were conducted between the SLT and the entire grade 11 . Each of these sessions consisted of open discussions and a restructuring of the leadership team by students. As a result of these discussions, the Council System was established. The Students identified 13 Councils according to the Key needs of the students. Each Council had an SLT member and several teachers to oversee the Councils.

At an Investiture ceremony, every Council member was invested with the responsibility and took a pledge relevant to their Council.

Council members meet once every fortnight to plan,review and execute different tasks as decided by the Council members.

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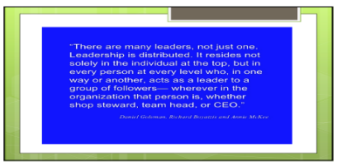

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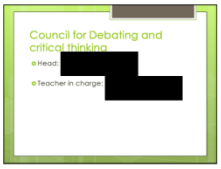

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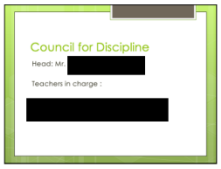

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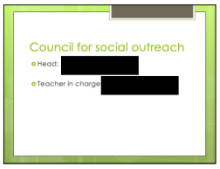

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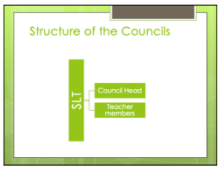

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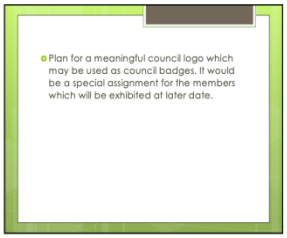
Plan for a meaningful council logo which may be used as council badges. It would be a special assignment for the members which will be exhibited at later date.

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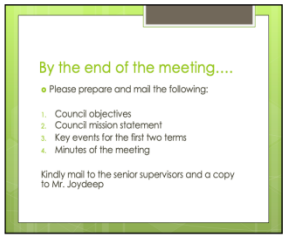
By the end of the meeting....
Please prepare and mail the following:
1. Council objectives
2. Council mission statement
3. Key events for the first two terms
4. Minutes of the meeting
Kindly mail to the senior supervisors and a copy to Mr. Joydeep

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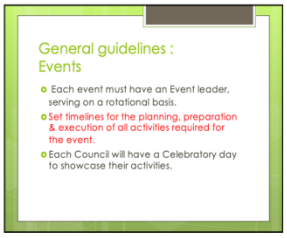
General guidelines : Events
Each event must have an Event leader, serving on a rotational basis.
Set timelines for the planning, preparation & execution of all activities required for the event.
Each Council will have a Celebratory day to showcase their activities.

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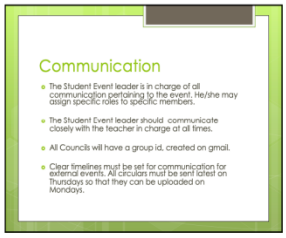

Communication
The Student Event leader is in charge of all communication pertaining to the event. He/she may assign specific roles to specific members.
The Student Event leader should communicate closely with the teacher in charge at all times.
All Councils will have a group id, created on gmail.
Clear timelines must be set for communication for external events. All circulars must be sent latest on Thursdays so that they can be uploaded on Mondays.

22


Thank you & all the very best !!

23

Appendix 22
NVivo 14 Data Analysis – Themes development

we've got different mechanisms like which student voice gives rise to student activism and student.

Researcher - GS: [00:05:16.07] So are you taking part of this mechanism or what is your role as a school leader in all of these practices and activities? Where are you based on this?

Head of School: [00:05:24.80] Oh, student councils. I go in randomly from time to time to house meetings. I go in randomly from time to time. So, it's not obviously it's not a very structured way, but I move around so that I get a gist of what's happening. We have circle time with students. I myself lead one circle in grade nine among grade nine students. Every week we have 40 minutes of circle time where different matters are discussed so CBL for example pI go in for quality assurance and making sure you know, so my role differs depending on the kind of activity it is.

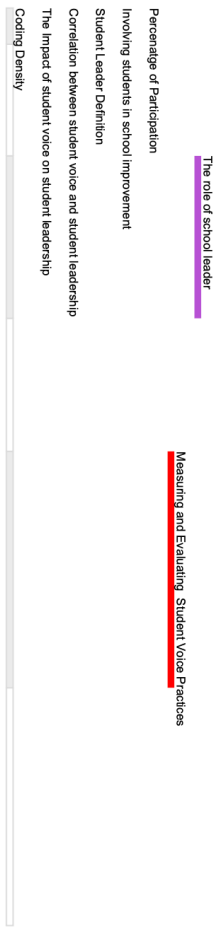
Researcher - GS: [00:06:03.44] And how do you evaluate as a school leader or school leaders and evaluate or measure the effectiveness of such practices? Do you have a measurement tool that you feel like, yeah, it's successful?

Head of School: [00:06:18.62] So we have feedback surveys that we conduct from time to time on different matters. So, in fact, our council system evolved because of a response to a survey. So, we have different mechanisms by which we take different occasions, where we have different surveys. Of course, we use the past survey information as well, but internally whenever we see so it's more of an agile survey that we use. So, when we see there's a concern or we see there's something that we need feedback on, we immediately run a survey. Students are now used to these surveys, sometimes a three-question survey, sometimes it's a five-question survey, sometimes a ten question, sometimes a two-question survey. But we need a very quick input from students. So, and even on impact of what we're doing. So, it was do you find this effective or was this useful to you? Things like that.

Researcher - GS: [00:07:08.42] And the school leaders themselves, the ones you they are working like 65 you mentioned or 67 those leaders, they have impact on school improvement and the school community, right?

Head of School: [00:07:20.48] Yes. Is definitely.

Researcher - GS: [00:07:22.19] Yeah. This is. And how do you feel like it's definitely having an impact what kind of indicators you have.



Head of School: [00:09:52.72] So I believe that when there are avenues for student voice to be expressed and heard and actioned, that has the maximum impact on student leadership. And that's when the students begin to believe that they can create a change or an impact in whatever areas are looking at. Like this morning I had four boys come to me because they're very enthusiastic about aviation and they wanted, you know, the whole school to be excited about aviation. We said, no, we can't have. So, we don't always listen to everything they say, but we guide them in terms of, you know, what is the rational thing to do. And so, they wanted so we said, you can have your club only after you've demonstrated that you've got at least 50 people interested in what you're saying. And in order to demonstrate that, you need to do one, two, three, four things. So those are the kind of guidelines that we give them when they are sure that sometimes children are not sure. And just because they've said it doesn't mean it has to happen. So that is our role then as senior leaders and educators to guide them towards, you know, seeing their plan to fruition.

Researcher - GS: [00:10:53.74] Perfect. And you gave example already because I wanted to ask your example, but what kind of student leadership practices should be fostered at the school level, not only at your school and in general as a school leader, you believe this is a must have in any school to foster student leadership?

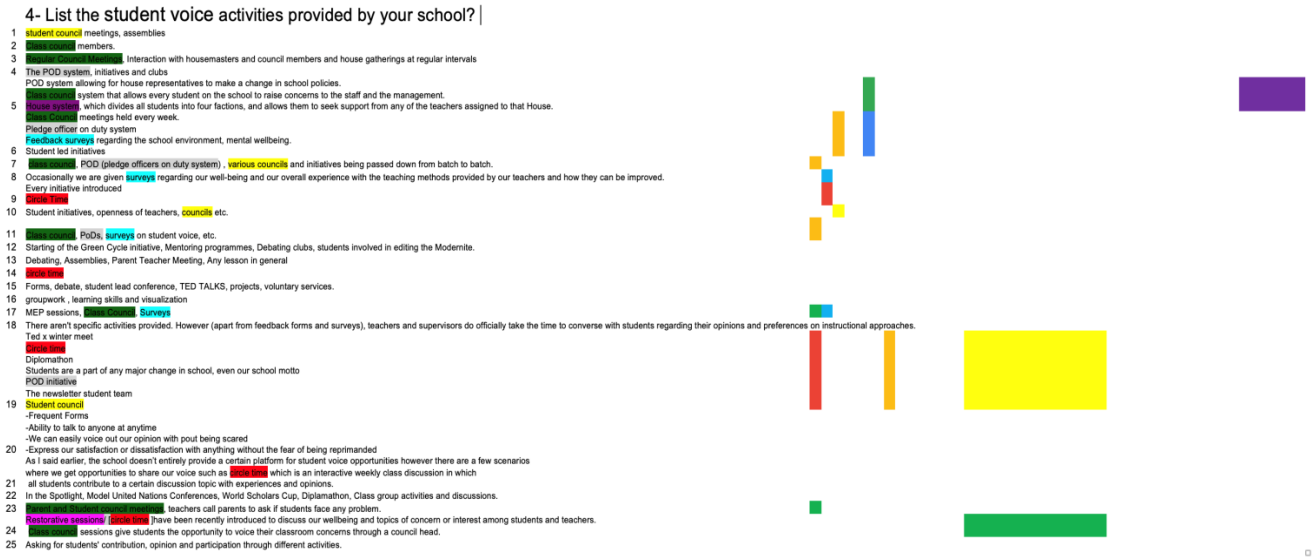
Head of School: [00:11:11.83] So I think our practice fosters in inculcating self-belief in students and then empowering them and equipping them with competencies that they will need to succeed in whatever they choose to execute. And student competencies are very clearly defined. Student leadership competencies are clearly defined. So, in fact, we're having a student conclave, leadership conclave, where every student in grade 11 is going through all of the leadership competencies and getting trained for leadership competencies, because only then we believe they can be successful in their council system.

Researcher - GS: [00:11:46.24] So this means as a school leader, you think that the student voice is one of the priorities that should be at the school level?

Head of School: [00:11:54.48] I think it's not only a priority, it's an essential component to have for effective leadership. Otherwise, you'll just have yes mam. Yes. Yes, sir. Yes, ma'am. Three bags full, ma'am. You know everything you said, no one will challenge. So, we teach them to respectfully challenge and we challenge them all the time. So, it's a two-way street. It's not that we challenge them and don't expect to be challenged, but we expect that they come in and respectfully challenge us as well.

Researcher - GS: [00:12:16.86] So do you involve all the students across the school and the student voice activities?

Appendix 23
NVivo 14 Data Analysis – Coding process



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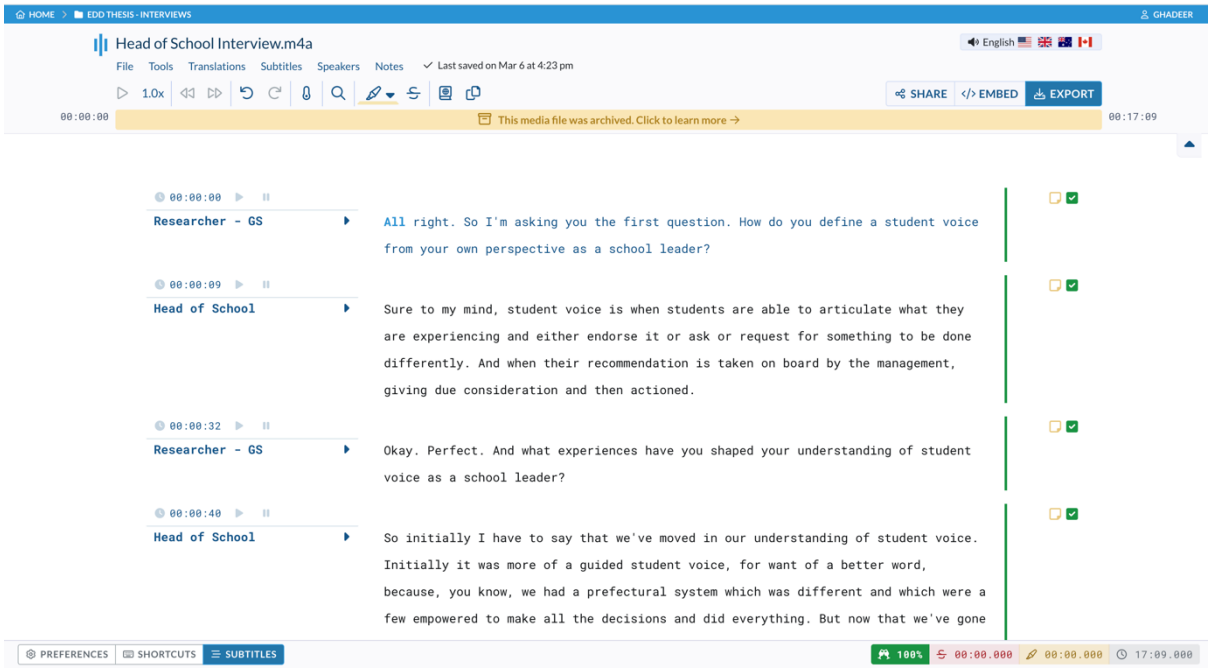
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Researcher - GS
All right. So I'm asking you the first question. How do you define a student voice from your own perspective as a school leader?
00:00:09
Head of School
Sure to my mind, student voice is when students are able to articulate what they are experiencing and either endorse it or ask or request for something to be done differently. And when their recommendation is taken on board by the management, giving due consideration and then actioned.
00:00:32
Researcher - GS
Okay. Perfect. And what experiences have you shaped your understanding of student voice as a school leader?
00:00:40
Head of School
So initially I have to say that we've moved in our understanding of student voice. Initially it was more of a guided student voice, for want of a better word, because, you know, we had a prefectural system which was different and which were a few empowered to make all the decisions and did everything. But now that we've gone
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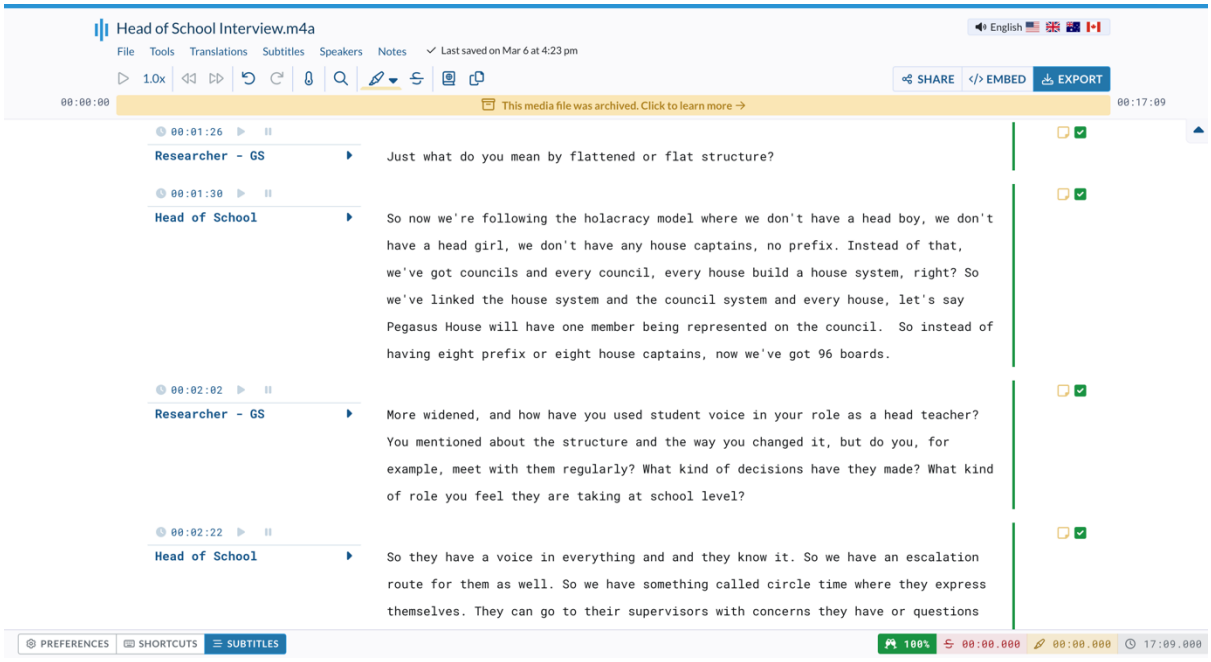
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Researcher - GS
Just what do you mean by flattened or flat structure?
00:01:30
Head of School
So now we're following the holacracy model where we don't have a head boy, we don't have a head girl, we don't have any house captains, no prefix. Instead of that, we've got councils and every council, every house build a house system, right? So we've linked the house system and the council system and every house, let's say Pegasus House will have one member being represented on the council. So instead of having eight prefix or eight house captains, now we've got 96 boards.
00:02:02
Researcher - GS
More widened, and how have you used student voice in your role as a head teacher? You mentioned about the structure and the way you changed it, but do you, for example, meet with them regularly? What kind of decisions have they made? What kind of role you feel they are taking at school level?
00:02:22
Head of School
So they have a voice in everything and and they know it. So we have an escalation route for them as well. So we have something called circle time where they express themselves. They can go to their supervisors with concerns they have or questions
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