This Summary presents the findings from Phase 1 of a major research project funded through the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage scheme.
The research was led by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University in partnership with the NSW Department of Education, the Catholic Schools Office (Diocese of Lismore), the Office of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People, the Australian National University, University of Sydney and University of Central Lancashire.

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PHASE 1 SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

This research, funded by the Australian Research Council (LP140100540)\(^1\), explored how student participation is understood and practised at school.

The project specifically aimed to find out if there is a connection between student participation and social and emotional wellbeing at school and, if so, which elements of participation are most closely associated with wellbeing.

The findings will help improve the ways in which student participation and wellbeing are understood, supported and measured in schools.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCH INVOLVE?

The study involved four phases:

**Phase 1:**

*An extensive policy analysis to identify what current NSW and Commonwealth education policy and other related guidelines say about student participation.*

**Phase 2:**

Focus groups with students (Years 7-10) and interviews with teachers, Principals and education policymakers.

**Phase 3:**

The development of a reliable and valid on-line survey to measure the elements of student participation and wellbeing at school using two samples of Year 7-10 students from NSW high schools.

**Phase 4:**

Administering the on-line survey, developed in Phase 3, to Year 7-10 students from high schools across NSW to test the links between the elements of student participation, student wellbeing and student recognition.

This document provides a summary of the findings from Phase 1.

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\(^1\) The Australian Research Council Linkage Program is a competitive research funding scheme offered by the Commonwealth Government for projects that also have support from industry partners. The partners for this ARC Linkage project were: Catholic Schools Office Lismore, NSW Department of Education, and Office of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People.
WHAT WAS INVOLVED IN PHASE 1 OF THE RESEARCH?

The policy analysis aimed to identify what current educational policy says about student participation.

The analysis involved three stages of inquiry:

STAGE 1

Identification of potentially relevant education policies, guidelines, toolkits or strategies from the Commonwealth government, NSW Department of Education and NSW Catholic School Dioceses. In total 143 documents were located and assessed on the basis of references made to ‘participation’. Documents were excluded if they did not make clear reference to ‘student’ participation.

Of the 143 documents, 51 were progressed to Stage 2 for further analysis.

STAGE 2

A categorisation system was developed to analyse how the documents frame student participation. The 51 documents were each allocated to one of the following categories:

• **Meaningful**: Students are positioned as actors in the educational process and overall school experience, and/or participation is framed in terms of student wellbeing and a positive learning experience

• **Partial**: Students are referred to as both actors and as objects to be acted upon, and/or student participation is framed in fragmented or contradictory terms

• **Superficial/tokenistic**: Students are presented as objects to be acted upon and participation is largely instrumental and/or future-oriented

• **Articulated but not developed**: Participation is referred to in a way that is potentially meaningful, but is not developed enough to categorise

• **Students are not the focus of the document/policy**: Participation is mentioned but the policy largely refers to other stakeholders.

16 policies were allocated to the ‘meaningful’ category and were progressed to Stage 3.

(Note that categorising these as ‘meaningful’ based on policy text is not assuming ‘meaningful’ in practice.)
The 16 documents were each more deeply analysed for:

1. How they articulate or frame \textit{participation};
2. How they conceptualise \textit{students};
3. The \textit{strategies} or \textit{mechanisms} described for promoting student participation.

The analysis also looked for any mention in the documentation of:
- Connections between participation and wellbeing;
- Children’s rights;
- Recognition theory interests (students being ‘valued’, ‘cared for’ or ‘respected’).

\textbf{WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?}

Student participation is framed in various ways, including as:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{STUDENT CONSULTATION} \hfill 7 of the 16 documents framed participation as consultation.
\item \textbf{STUDENT ENGAGEMENT} \hfill 3 of the 16 documents framed participation as engagement.
\item \textbf{STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS} \hfill 4 of the 16 documents framed participation as student connectedness.
\item \textbf{COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING} \hfill Excluding mention of SRCs, one resource for schools framed participation as collective decision making.
\item \textbf{POSITIVE AND RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS} \hfill 3 of the 16 documents framed participation as positive and respectful relationships.
\item \textbf{EQUALITY AND INCLUSION} \hfill 7 of the 16 documents framed participation as equality or inclusion.
\item \textbf{A RIGHT} \hfill 3 of the 16 documents framed participation as a right.
\item \textbf{STUDENT LEADERSHIP} \hfill 4 of the 16 documents framed participation as leadership or students being partners with leaders.
\end{itemize}

N.B. Some documents frame participation in multiple ways and were allocated to more than one category.
Students are conceptualised in a wide range of ways across the current policy landscape. Particular variation was found in terms of:

1) Whether students are referred to *individually* or as a *collective*;
2) The *extent* to which students are framed as *partners* in learning or in the school community alongside adults;
3) The *scope* of their participation (e.g. their level of influence or innovation).

Therefore, a *continuum* emerged in terms of how students are positioned in the educational process and school experience:

**WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THIS POLICY ANALYSIS ABOUT STUDENT PARTICIPATION?**

- Participation is referred to in a large number of policy related documents and there is evidence in many of these of intent to engage students.
- However, there is little consensus in the ways that *students* are conceptualised, nor how *participation* is framed, even amongst documents produced in the same year and by the same Department.
- There is no overarching policy document addressing or defining student participation. Participation is also rarely clearly defined in individual policy documents, creating further ambiguity and confusion.
- There is a heavy reliance on SRCs as the main avenue of student participation, without adequate consideration of their effectiveness nor of alternate or additional ways in which participation might occur.
- When students are identified as having a role in decision-making, there is rarely a requirement that students are informed of the outcomes, nor adequate guidance on how to provide such feedback.

**Consideration could therefore be given to:**

- A clear articulation of the role and value of student participation across all aspects of school life
- Conceptualising students as partners in their own learning and in school life as a basis for meaningful and effective participation
- Greater consistency in how student participation is framed within and across policy and planning documents for schools.
Three further phases of the project followed the policy analysis. Summaries of the findings from each of these further phases are also available. A range of practical resources have also been developed from the research to assist schools with embedding and monitoring effective approaches to student participation.

These include:

- A *Good Practice Guide* to support student participation.
- A survey tool to measure and monitor student participation and wellbeing.
- Video vignettes on participation at school.
- Professional learning resources for school staff.

For further information about this project please contact Professor Anne Graham
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The above resources and documents will be available at:

This research was funded by the Australian Government under the Australian Research Council Linkage Scheme. (Grant Number: LP140100540).