This Summary presents the findings from Phase 2 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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This research, funded by the Australian Research Council (LP140100540), 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 2.
WHO WAS INVOLVED IN PHASE 2 OF THE RESEARCH?

Ten high schools (6 government and 4 Catholic) across NSW were involved in Phase 2.

- At each school two student focus groups were conducted. One focus group at each school was with a mixed group of Year 7-8 students, and the other was with a mixed group of Year 9-10 students. The average size of each focus group was 9 students. A total of 177 students took part.

- Thirty-two staff members from across the 10 participating schools were interviewed (9 Principals, 10 Head Teachers and 13 teachers).

- Nine education policymakers were also interviewed for Phase 2. Five worked for the NSW Department of Education and four worked in the Catholic education sector.

WHAT DID WE ASK?

We asked students, school staff and policymakers about their understandings and experiences of student participation at school. Specifically, we wanted to find out:

- WHAT STUDENT PARTICIPATION MEANS TO THEM
- WHAT THEY BELIEVE ARE THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION
- WHAT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST FOR PARTICIPATION AT THEIR SCHOOL
- WHAT THEY BELIEVE ARE THE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION AT SCHOOL
- WHETHER AND HOW STUDENT PARTICIPATION AT SCHOOL COULD BE IMPROVED.
WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

What does ‘participation’ at school mean?

Student participation means different things to students, school staff and policymakers. For some students and teachers, participation is about simply taking part in everyday activities at school within and outside of the classroom. For others, it is about being involved in decisions about important things that are happening at school. Overall, we identified four different but related understandings of student participation:

- **HAVING VOICE**: where participation is about being listened to and heard in different areas of school life.
- **HAVING INFLUENCE**: where students’ views influence actions or decisions at school.
- **HAVING CHOICE**: where participation is about selecting from a range of options or opportunities across different areas of school life and is about actively choosing to get involved if conditions are right to make this an attractive option.
- **WORKING TOGETHER**: where participation is about teachers and students taking shared action in all aspects of school life.

**Having voice:**

“Saying what’s on your mind.”
(Yr 7-8 Student)

**Having influence:**

“Students’ ideas are heard and recognised and acted upon.”
(Yr 7-8 Student)

**Having choice:**

“It’s more a conscious decision to do something above just general attendance.”
(Head Teacher)

“…you had a set of choices…but there was pretty much everything there…I got to present the one I wanted to. I knew stuff about it, but I wanted to learn more and it sort of made me like happy I got to choose that one.”
(Yr 9-10 Student)

**Working together:**

“I personally think student participation centres around students gathering together with support of teachers to encourage them to be involved in activities both extra and curricular.”
(Yr 9-10 Student)

Policymakers mostly perceived participation in terms of a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning. For example, customising teaching to meet individual student needs, and involving students more in directing their own learning journey.
Students and teachers explained that participation can potentially occur in many different aspects of school life:

- In the classroom, such as being able to choose different ways to submit an assignment, or being involved in developing the marking criteria for a unit of work;
- Activities outside class, such as extra-curricular clubs, creative groups, volunteering, school excursions, camps, fundraising days and social events;
- Formal participatory structures, such as the Student Representative Council (SRC);
- Informal ways, such as through conversation and dialogue (especially between students and teachers and in spaces such as roll call or home room);
- Through being supported individually at school, such as interacting with the school counsellor and special needs support;
- In policy development.

However, other important issues were evident:

- Teachers are perceived by students to be the ‘gatekeepers’ of student participation at school – they establish the cultural conditions for whether students are listened to, heard and able to have influence in different aspects of school life.
- Students appreciated teachers’ efforts to provide small choices in the classroom, but they had higher hopes and expectations about what they might be able to influence outside of the classroom (e.g. when organising events or being part of the SRC).
- Traditional SRC models were perceived to be tokenistic because they only provide a voice to limited students and do not have much influence.

“It’s trying to say, ‘Yes we as staff respect you guys and we want to hear what you have to say’ until it gets to...what you have to say because then we’re going to ignore everything… I feel like it’s kind of all for show in a way…”
(Yr 9-10 Student)

“I’ve been on SRC for three years. I quit because I know this school has given us a label and said, ‘The SRC - you’ve got a voice’ but we don’t really.”
(Yr 9-10 Student)
Some schools were trying new techniques for improving their SRC, including:

- Electing two representatives per class rather than per year group (so the students actually know one another);
- Operating open SRC meetings where any student can turn up (no elected representatives);
- Allocating time (such as 20 minutes per week) for SRC representatives and teachers to gather ideas and share any news with a whole year group;
- Operating a ‘floating SRC’ where different groups of students form different project-focused committees depending upon their interests e.g., a school grounds group.

Overall, principals and teachers were generally open to the importance of student participation and willing to try new ideas and initiatives, particularly if these could be shown to return benefits to the students and the school community.

What are the perceived benefits of participation?

Most students and school staff talked about a positive ‘snowball’ of benefits arising from student participation. These included:

- Increased engagement (enjoyment and motivation) in school work;
- Improved school functioning;
- Better relationships and sense of community at school.

“The new group of seniors, they lobbied, and they got a petition, and they...booked a meeting with the Principal, and they went and stated their case. And they had their first dance party last term, and it was a huge success, and there was not one incident. So that’s student voice for you” (Head Teacher)

Many students spoke about the benefits of participation in terms of their wellbeing, such as feeling happier to come to school, more willing to learn, and being treated as ‘human beings’:

“By asking for opinions and ideas, it gives the students a feeling of worth, which will help them to participate at school more.” (Yr 9-10 Student)

Teachers and policymakers also perceived that participation at school helps develop important life skills in communication, negotiation, reasoning and lifelong learning, as well as build confidence and self-esteem to help students adapt and thrive:

“It gets them to be thoughtful. It gets them to be leaders. It gets them to be proactive and not reactive. It gives them experience of disappointment, success.” (Principal)

It is important to note that students, teachers and policymakers were usually reporting perceived benefits rather than actual experiences.
What makes participation at school difficult?

A number of barriers to successful student participation at school were identified.

**PRACTICAL BARRIERS:**

- Policy constraints (especially around compliance and testing)
- Time constraints
- Funding constraints

> “Unfortunately I think there’s a disconnect. The compliance imperatives, the capital ‘A’ of accountability, driven from MySchool - I don’t think lends itself to spending a lot of time thinking about what Year 9 want, to be frank.”

(Policymaker)

Students and staff also talked about the practical difficulty of giving every student voice, choice, influence or opportunities to work together given the large numbers of students in many high schools:

> “Our seniors are very involved, but we have 800-900 students in our Years 7, 8, 9 and 10. And so it’s a bit of a question at the moment, ‘how do we give those students the voice?’”

(Assistant Principal)

**PERSONAL BARRIERS:**

- Student attitudes – belief their views won’t have any influence, teacher favouritism, participation is ‘not cool’, lack of interest, other priorities, shyness.
- Staff attitudes – belief that young people are not interested and/or that they won’t participate meaningfully and cooperatively, concern that things will get out of control, belief that teachers know more than students, that participation is too much work, or just ‘another reform’.

> “Even if we were consulted the adults probably wouldn’t have valued our opinion because adults never take into account teenagers; children’s opinions anyway.”

(Yr 9-10 Student)

**Staff attitudes:**

> “Kids don’t always know their own minds, they don’t always have the ability to articulate their thoughts…”

(Principal)
How could participation at school be improved?

A number of practical suggestions were offered to improve student participation at school:

- Ask students how it would be best to gather their views about different aspects of school life.
- Ask students regularly what they would like to contribute to at school and then discuss with them what might or might not be possible – and why. Ensure all students can be involved if they wish, e.g., offer different ways to contribute and aim to conduct discussions as a year group or class.
- Maintain on-going communication with students. Report back to students regularly on decisions and actions and give clear reasons for anything that cannot go ahead.

“Don’t just leave it to rumours or Chinese whispers.” (Yr 9-10 Student)

For these ideas to work, it is important that teachers are challenged and supported to shift entrenched mindsets that limit or prevent meaningful participation and the recognition of students as experts about their own experiences:

“It’s hard because we’re adults and we think we’re an expert. We are an expert on our knowledge, but we’re not an expert of the child and how they want to learn at times” (Teacher)

Therefore, school staff, students and policymakers suggested that professional development for staff around student participation is needed. They also highlighted that it is important that this is supported by the time, resources and structures to put the new learning into practice.

A final point emerged that is critical in operationalising these practical suggestions: schools need to take responsibility for improving participation at school:

“The teacher needs to be the one that’s going to stick to the plan” (Teacher)

This might be assisted by:

- Making it a priority to ensure the school community is fun, welcoming and safe to be a part of – through, for example, increased out of class activities that are less formal and promote relationship building.
- Ensuring the Principal is actively involved in the school community – participating in routine activities with students - and is visible and accessible to students at other times.
- Creating avenues for students to put forward ideas for new events or activities, and supporting students to bring these to fruition.

Importantly, it was seen as central that schools are proactive in developing and encouraging students’ participation skills across different aspects of school life to help build their confidence to participate (and a belief that doing so will be worth the effort):

“It’s about building up the courage of kids to become involved in things and supporting them whilst they’re developing their skills and abilities, and I think that’s the genuine participation…and not the tokenistic stuff.” (Principal)
Phase 3 of the study used the above findings to develop a reliable and valid on-line survey that measures student participation. Phase 4 then tested the links between the elements of student participation and wellbeing with a large number of students from different regions of NSW and in different educational systems.

A range of practical resources have been developed from the project 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 and information pack for schools to measure and monitor student participation and wellbeing;
- Video vignettes on participation at school;
- Professional learning resources for school staff.

The above resources and documents will be available at:

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