“Getting better bit by bit”: Exploring How Teachers Evaluate and Create Conditions for Student Voice in Irish Post-Primary Physical Education

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Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Physical Education at the University of Limerick.

Supervised by Professor Mary O’ Sullivan

Submitted to the University of Limerick, June 2018
Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in post-primary Irish Physical Education alongside students and identify the consequences this has for future practice and policy in schools. The study adopted a Participatory Action Research approach within a comparative case-study centring on a small cluster of three practicing Physical Education teachers (including the researcher) and their respective students. Methods for data collection were focus group interviews, one-on-one interviews, a Teacher-Researcher reflection journal, and student written reflections.

The findings suggest that while teachers initially felt their schools listened to their students constructively, and allowed for students to take on equal roles within Physical Education and the school, the reality in which this played out was more limited and tokenistic. However, by the end of the study teachers and students observed notable changes in teacher practice and their own dispositions to student voice. The fact that teachers were not forthcoming in adopting a student voice approach with high stakes examination based subjects indicates a lack of confidence or, perhaps, a reluctance to re-imagine their high stakes examination subjects.

If student voice is to be genuinely evaluated and created within schools, then it’s time to move beyond the status quo, recognising that the ways we think we listen to and involve our students in their learning experiences are not recognised by students as giving them enough autonomy and influence. Furthermore, space is needed within school timetables specifically dedicated to student voice rather than being expected to occur within current school scheduling. If the spirit of the recent education legislation and fresh curricula in Ireland is to be upheld and implemented, it is necessary to adopt a committed approach to practice and research, ensuring that teachers and schools best serve the needs of their students.
Declaration

“I hereby declare that this project is entirely my own work other than the counsel of my supervisor and that it has not been submitted for any academic award, or part thereof, at this or any other educational establishment”

Signed,

Author: Donal Howley

Supervisor: Professor Mary O’ Sullivan
Acknowledgements

*Think where man's glory most begins and ends, and say my glory was I had such friends.*

(W.B. Yeats)

Thanks to Cian, AnnMarie, Dan, Ann, Ursula, Missy, Jaimie and all past and present staff in PESS for your tuition and rapport since I first began as an undergraduate. Thanks, especially, to Deborah and Eimear for lighting the fire of inquiry within me which still burns brightly today; you inspired me as a curious undergraduate and led me to where I am now. I enjoy what I’m doing because you showed me how through your own extraordinary work.

Thanks to my former housemates who I lived alongside in Millbrook and Woodville. Your friendship and comradery know no bounds – literally. Thanks to all my friends and extended family from UL, Clare, Dublin, Ireland and the rest of the world. Thank you all for continuously making me challenge myself, laugh, smile, explore and dream.

Thanks to the management, staff, and students of Clonkeen College - especially Mick Brennan, who has taught me to somewhat respect my elders, and appreciate the past in shaping the future. The enthusiasm, commitment and care you all show for each other inside and outside of the classroom helps me to know I’m part of something special. Every day is, indeed, a school day - *Tada Gan Iarracht!*

Thanks to Pat and Niamh for knowing “No” wasn’t an answer. Your commitment to your schools and students is something to be proud of; your friendship and support to me is something I am eternally grateful for. Thanks for taking on the challenge with me - we’re all the better for it.

Mary – *I won’t keep you long!* Thank you for your wisdom and patience these last two years. You saw something in what I was trying to do and went with it. You’re unwavering support, guidance, positivity, enthusiasm and sound advice not only guided me towards completion of this research, but also towards a greater understanding of myself as a researcher, teacher and person. You treded softly, knowing when to push and, even more so, when to step back. Our meetings, arguments, and breakaway discussions will be forever treasured. I am all the better for having met and worked under you. You’re only getting started…

Thanks to Dad, Conor and Brian for your careful and underlying support in everything I have done and making it possible for me to pursue. Thanks to Mam; for being Mam and simply being happy in seeing me happy. Thanks to all four of you for always contributing and helping make it possible for me to be the best and happiest that I can be.

*Never Mind the Strangers!*
Dedication

Dedicated to the Physical Education teachers and students who participated in this study –
Mol an Óige agus Tiofaidh Siad!
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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research investigates how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in Irish post-primary Physical Education alongside students. This chapter presents a rationale for the study, the aim of the study, the research questions, an outline of the methodology used, and definition of terms.

1.2 Rationale for Study

Student voice work has been recognised in literature as an opportunity to empower students to participate meaningfully and collaboratively in improving their respective experiences of school (Fielding, 2004; Rudduck & McIntrye, 2007). Currently, government policy in Ireland is clear that children and young people should have a say in matters that directly affect them and that they should be empowered to express their views (Devine, 2017). In post-primary education this mandate is complimented by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment’s (NCCA, 2015) work to reform the Junior Cycle, which includes a current commitment to ensuring student voice is implemented within the framework as well as future curriculum reform. Accompanying this, is a small and emerging literature base on student voice in post primary schools (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010; Flynn 2014; Fleming 2015). Despite this, it is generally agreed that children occupy an ambivalent position within Irish society (Shevlin & Rose, 2008). Consequently, opportunities, challenges and contestation of student voice within policy and practice in Irish Education continues to exist (Fleming, 2015). We still do not know much about the benefits or challenges associated with this kind of work in the Irish post-primary settings, let alone how teachers might be supported in facilitating students’ active participation in ‘authentic listening’. If the spirit of the legislation in Ireland is to be upheld, it is necessary to adopt a similarly assertive approach to researching approaches which increase pupil autonomy (Shevlin & Rose, 2008).

The issue of capturing a breadth of representation of student voice remains difficult (Brooker & McDonald, 1999). Despite efforts to place students at the centre of the post-
primary school experience, student voice remains complex and contested in its positioning within policy and practice as reflected in Irish schools (Fleming 2015). Prior to this study, I advocated the concept of student voice within Physical Education curricula and across post-primary schools (Howley & Tannehill, 2014). Having experienced the challenges and complexities first hand that creating conditions for student voice can bring to a teacher and their students, I wanted to conduct a study which involved students in a meaningful and authentic way. Student voice holds significant promise if it is approached with authentic motives and proceeds with an ethos of care and compassion (Pearce & Wood, 2016). Yet, how this currently plays and currently implemented across the entirety of Irish post-primary schools is still imperceptible; further investigation can only serve to inform us better on how this can be done.

Until further research is published, the chasm between student voice theory and actual practice on the ground at the coal face of Irish post-primary schools remains. It was hoped that by conducting this study, I could provide more evidence, advocacy and support which can serve to inform us on how teachers of Physical Education and, indeed, teachers across post-primary schools, can facilitate student voice with an Irish post-primary setting. In doing so, I aimed to provide valuable recommendations for further research in student voice in Physical Education curricula and, specifically, the Physical Education curriculum in the Irish Junior Cycle. It was also hoped that evidence might emerge that would have implications for the education of current and prospective teachers as well as policymakers and related teaching bodies.

1.3 Aim of the Study
The aim of this study was to explore how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in post-primary Irish Physical Education alongside students and identify the consequences this has for future practice and policy in schools.

1.4 Research Questions
Three research questions have guided the study:

1) How did teachers and schools accommodate student voice in the design and delivery and assessment of their students in schools?
2) What changes did teachers make to practice in Physical Education over the course of the study to facilitate student voice and what impact did this have?

3) How does student voice challenge the way Post-Primary teachers and students view Physical Education and other subjects, and what consequences does this have?

1.5 Overview of Chapters

This section outlines the monograph style through which this research is presented, explaining the purpose of each chapter.

1.5.1 Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter explores research material pertaining to this study. It presents a definition of student voice as well as two theoretical frameworks for student voice which informed how the research was conducted and the data analysed. It investigates the concept of student voice from a broad international perspective and, then, in a Physical Education context, before looking at national literature, providing a rationale for further exploration in a post-primary school setting. It synthesises the literature reviewed and summarises considerations for future directions in exploring how teachers evaluate and create student voice in an Irish post-primary setting.

1.5.2 Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter outlines the qualitative methods which I, as the researcher, used to conduct the study. It describes the context within which the study was based and profiles the participants involved. It then recounts the methodological procedures through which the study progressed. It presents and rationalises the data collection instruments implemented during the study. It explains the process through which the accumulated data were collected and analysed to gain findings and themes for discussion.
1.5.3 Chapter Four: Research Findings

This chapter presents the key research findings of the study in relation to how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in Irish post-primary Physical Education. It provides a breakdown of the main research findings into significant themes and topics which have been determined through the data analysis process.

1.5.4 Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter discusses and analyses how teachers evaluated and created conditions for student voice in their post-primary Physical Education classes, based on the three questions that guided the study. It interprets, compares, and contrasts the data gathered in the context of what is already known from existing research literature with a view to contributing to the knowledge base. It explores each research question in a sequential manner based on the findings generated at the beginning, middle and end of the study.

1.5.5 Chapter Six: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

This section summarises the main findings of the study. It highlights areas where more work is needed and suggests avenues for future development of student voice work within Irish post-primary Physical Education and, across post-primary schools. A number of implications for policymakers, teaching bodies and, indeed, teachers themselves are presented as well as an agenda for researchers that continues the spirit of enquiry and understanding of student voice spawned by this study. It also draws an overall conclusion from the study.

1.6 Glossary of Terms

Student Voice

Student voice as a term asks us to connect the sound of students speaking not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence, but also with their having the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools (Cook-Sather,
2006). It “describes the many ways in which youth actively participate in the school decisions that shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (Mitra, 2007, p. 727).

Physical Education

Physical Education applies a holistic approach to the concept of physical activity for young people. It recognises the physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions of human movement, and emphasises the contribution of physical activity to the promotion of individual and group wellbeing. Learning in Physical Education involves the acquisition of knowledge, concepts, skills, and attitudes central to Physical Education, together with recognition of its potential for integration with other curriculum areas. (NCCA, 2003)

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR represents “an epistemology that assumes knowledge is rooted in social relations and most powerful when produced collaboratively through action” (Fine et al, 2001, p. 173). It is a qualitative research method that sees people “co-creating their reality through participation; through their experience; their imagination and intuition, their thinking and their action” (Reason, 1998, p. 262).

Dialogue and Dialogic Interaction

The terms dialogue and dialogic interaction are used in this study in the same sense as Pearce & Wood’s (2016) *Evaluative Framework for Student Voice* presents them. The terms refer to the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanised; this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s depositing ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be consumed by the discussants (Freire, 1996). From a critical theory perspective, dialogue and dialogic interaction has as its goal the flattening of social relations and an escape from the oppressive forces inherent to a hierarchically organised social order, all the while also being oriented towards action, making it the ideal starting point for transformative student voice (Pearce & Wood, 2016).
Chapter Two
Literature Review

2.1 Introduction
The purpose of this literature review is to explore the source material pertaining to this study and provide a context which has inspired and advocated the purpose and approach to exploring how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in Irish post-primary Physical Education.

Firstly, it explores the concept of student voice from a broad perspective and places it within two currently recognised theoretical frameworks. Secondly, it explores advocacy in adopting a student voice approach in international research literature while also identifying the challenges facing researchers, teachers and students in applying such an approach. Next, it looks at how student voice is positioned and practiced within Irish Post Primary schools before focusing on student voice in Physical Education settings, locally and internationally. A number of contemporary student voice research initiatives within Irish post primary settings are presented to aid the justification of further inquiry. I then look at how embracing participatory methodologies as research and pedagogy tools can help evaluate and create conditions for eliciting and capturing student voice.

Finally, the chapter will synthesize the literature reviewed and summarise considerations for future directions in exploring how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in Irish Post Primary schools and Physical Education.

2.2 Student Voice
This section provides a broad overview of student voice, including a number of definitions. The notion of “student voice,” or a student role in the decision making and change efforts of schools, has emerged in the new millennium as a potential strategy for improving the success of school reform efforts and improving students’ learning experiences (Mitra, 2004). At the simplest level, student voice can consist of young people sharing their opinions of school problems with administrators and faculty (Mitra, et.al., 2012). Student voice work has been recognised in literature as an opportunity to empower students to participate meaningfully and collaboratively in improving their respective experiences of school (Fielding, 2004; Rudduck & McIntrye, 2007). Thus “student voice” as a term asks us to connect the sound of
students speaking not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence, but also with their having the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools (Cook-Sather, 2006). It “describes the many ways in which youth actively participate in the school decisions that shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (Mitra, 2007, p. 727).

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks of Student Voice

This section presents the theoretical frameworks for student voice within which this study is placed. Recent theoretical frameworks regarding student voice point to an appreciation of the complexity and challenge of the interaction of power with any authentic and emerging student voice in schools (Fleming, 2015). Paralleling the increasing interest in, and support for engaging with the ways in which students construct meaning to this, is an expanding body of work around student voice, which calls for more student-centred democratic approaches to education (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2013). With this in mind, this study uses Fielding’s Patterns of Partnership (2012), which has helped guide early NCCA student voice initiatives within the New Junior Cycle in Post Primary Schools.

Fielding’s Patterns of Partnership (2012) presents six forms of interaction between teachers and students which represent meaningful opportunities for creating and developing student voice within schools. They are:

1) Students as data source – in which staff utilise information they have gathered and received from students themselves to further inform them about student progress and well-being.
2) Students as active respondents – in which staff invite student dialogue and discussion to deepen learning/professional decisions.
3) Students as co-enquirers - in which staff take a lead role with high-profile, active student support.
4) Students as knowledge creators – in which students take lead roles with active staff support.
5) Students as joint authors – in which students and staff decide on a joint course of action together.
6) Intergenerational learning as lived democracy – in which there is a shared commitment to/responsibility for the common good (e.g. young people
working with elderly people or a school establishing a research forum which explores what its values are and try to articulate these and whether or not they live these values.

(Fielding, 2015, p. 49-50)

Table 2.1 Fielding’s Patterns of Partnership

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<tr>
<th>Instrumental dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fielding’s Patterns of Partnership (2012)</td>
<td>How adults listen to and learn with students in school</td>
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<td>6. Intergenerational learning as lived democracy</td>
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<td>High performance schooling</td>
<td>Person centred education</td>
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<td>5. Students as joint authors</td>
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<td>4. Students as knowledge creators</td>
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<td>3. Students as co-enquirers</td>
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Fielding (2015), in addressing the nature and consequences of differing approaches to student voice identifies three key overarching points that connect with “contemporary challenges of crisis and opportunity” (p. 28, 2015). These are, first, that relationships matter. Second, that, in its richest and most fully developed sense, learning is a deeply mutual undertaking. Third, that democracy matters too, and matters enough to require not just a voice in societal conversation but a special place, embodied and enacted on a daily basis in
the arrangements and aspirations of schools and other key parts of our educational system (Fielding, 2015).

The framework requires a commitment first and foremost to democracy and the rights of the students, recognising that students are citizens, not merely citizens in preparation, whose rights should be respected in the present as well as in the future (Bush, 2012). Within this, lies the immediate commitment to their voice and constructive dialogue with adults in school contexts.

Recognising the significant limitations of proposing a one-size-fits-all evaluative framework, Pearce & Wood’s Framework for Evaluating Student Voice (2016) offers a rejuvenated framework for evaluating student voice work to contribute to ongoing discussions on the extent to which student voice is indeed transformative within schools. This framework differs somewhat from that put forward by Fielding, as it is intended to be read as a series of building blocks that are required more widely for meaningful student voice initiatives. Together, these building blocks form a “set of conditions, orientations, dispositions and pedagogic approaches for transformative work” (Pearce & Wood, pg. 1, 2016), rather than the sequential continuum presented by Fielding. Pearce and Wood’s (2016) Framework for Evaluating Student Voice suggests that transformative voice work should be:

1. Dialogic - it must have as its goal the flattening of social relations and an escape from the oppressive forces inherent to a hierarchically organised social order, all the while also being oriented towards action, making it the ideal starting point for transformative student voice.
2. Intergenerational - adults have a role in facilitating the participation of young people, but this must begin with an acknowledgement that the young people are more than capable of voicing their opinions, that their facilitation may not be needed at all, but also that they may need to work closely with young people to find a method of participation appropriate to their competencies
3. Collective and Inclusive - it must be collective and inclusive, providing all students and stakeholders the opportunity to empower themselves.
4. Transgressive - student voice work can and does provide students with the tools or medium to resist, escape or transform systems that promote inequality.

(Pearce & Wood, 2016)
Pearce and Wood (2016) argue that the interaction of these four themes forms a set of principles or building blocks which collectively underpin transformative student voice work, contending that meaningful student voice initiatives are likely to lack real authenticity if any one of these four blocks, or themes, is not considered or facilitated. However, they do acknowledge that to properly establish a student voice initiative, teachers and students will firstly find themselves engaging at a dialogic level before they begin to work together at an intergenerational or collective and inclusive level. Indeed, the unique environment of the school may dictate which of the two latter elements establish themselves more. For student voice to reach a *transgressive* phase, the initiative must be willing to effect real change and to cross or transgress traditional borders and power relations within schools.

While both frameworks offer a contemporary vision for student voice work, they are, by their nature, liberal and dynamic in how they see student voice being lived in schools. Rather than restrict thinking and practice, they serve to broaden it, allowing for change and progress relevant to the contexts where they are utilised. Using these frameworks to guide teachers, students and researchers in how they can set about evaluating and creating student voice within their schools and moving such initiatives towards genuine transformation which can then serve to inform us better.

### 2.4 Advocacy of Student Voice in Research Literature

This section looks at advocacy of student voice in academic literature. In the last decade, there has been a rapid growth and proliferation of student voice initiatives in schools, as a diversity of educational stakeholders implement such initiatives in the hopes of improving educational quality (Pearce & Wood, 2016). Student voice can help inform the development
of a subject in ways that other stakeholders cannot (Brooker & McDonald, 1999). The
student’s experience of school culture and subjects is unique and contemporary. Student
perspectives on schooling that are shared can help teachers to reflect on their own practices
(McIntyre et al., 2005) Listening to students can provide valuable perspectives and new
insights into the complexities of teaching and learning that can then be applied to improving
the quality of subject programs in our schools (Dyson, 2006). Encouraging students to speak
out about matters that concern them in school, whether in playgrounds, corridors, classrooms
or lessons, helps teachers to see the school world through the eyes of the main actors in
school and adapt their practices accordingly, albeit within the contexts of internal and
external school policy discourses and teachers’ own value-laden perspectives of practice
(Busher, 2012). Involving students directly in 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 (Sebba and
Robinson, 2011). By listening and learning from students, we begin to see their experiences
of their worlds from their points of view (Oliver, 2010). This evidence suggests that a student
voice approach to supporting young people is fundamental to the development of an inclusive
learning environment for the benefit of all students (Flynn, 2014). When teachers and
students begin to work in these new ways they are not just redrawing the boundaries of what
is permissible and thereby jointly extending a sense of what is possible: they are also giving
each other the desire and the strength to do so through their regard and care for each other
(Fielding, 2012).

There is widespread agreement among all young people that they should be treated
with respect by teachers and that their opinions should be valued (Gorard and Huat, 2011).
Significantly, utilising young people’s views can not only help researchers and policy makers
to understand more about issues within schools, it can also help them to identify potential
solutions and avenues to change (Hallett & Prout, 2003; Flutter and Ruddock, 2004). The
positive aspects of student voice identified in the research literature highlight how student
presence and involvement within conversations and efforts that have traditionally been the
purview of adults has the potential to affect a cultural shift in educational research and reform
(Cook-Sather, 2006). Research consistently emphasises that we should be working with
students as partners in education and not imposing on them what they should “soak up like a
sponge” from their teachers (Dyson, 2006). As a result of such research, student voice
continues to grow and gain respect of teachers and policy makers.
Recent advocacy still holds significant promise for student voice if approached with authentic motives and proceeds with an ethos of care and compassion (Pearce & Wood, 2016). Groundwater-Smith & Mockler (2016) encourage increased authentic student voice work which involves the building of generative relationships and the joint engagement of adults and young people. Due to these impassioned calls, student voice continues to grow and gain respect of teachers and policy makers both locally and internationally. Allied with this increase in respect and acknowledgment of student voice is an appreciation of its many forms and complexities.

2.5 Challenges facing Student Voice

Despite the increasing amount of international literature regarding student voice, the issue of capturing a breadth of representation of student voice remains difficult (Brooker & McDonald, 1999). Researchers, teachers and students face a variety of obstacles and challenges when attempting to create conditions for student voice in their classrooms. It is clear that the process of actually hearing pupils’ voices, and acting upon them, is far from straightforward (Sandford and Duncombe, 2010). A concern among some advocates of student voice work regards the possibility that the oversimplification of the issues involved in changing school culture to make it more responsive to students will lead to tokenism, manipulation, and practices not matching rhetoric (Cook-Sather, 2006). While acknowledging the valuable data yielded by existing research, the approach taken is often tokenistic in nature because young people’s contributions tend to be directed, structured and limited by external, adult-led, research agenda (Sandford & Duncombe, 2010). This in turn creates challenges for researchers, teachers and students alike. The following sub sections look at many challenges facing researchers, teachers and students in creating and sustaining meaningful opportunities for student voice.

2.5.1 Challenges for Researchers

Researchers need to discover better ways for teachers to access student voice, so this knowledge can better inform their practice (Dyson, 2006). There is a danger that adult researchers’ and sponsors’ agendas can dominate this type of research, muting pupil voices and leading to a misinterpretation of information, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and lack of serious engagement by the youth participants (Sandford & Duncombe, 2010). The voice of
the student can be misconstrued by the presence of the researcher’s agenda. In such instances, it is difficult not to reduce students’ comments and insights to any “single, uniform and invariable experience” (Silva & Rubin, 2003, p. 2). On top of this, the research strategies adopted can be unconventional and overly progressive. This deviation from tradition and negotiating of this ‘temporary destabilising period of change is a difficult and complex departure without institutional or collegial support (Enright, 2010). Consequently, the extent to which collegial support is provided can potentially alter the practical environment beyond what is realistic and sustainable in a school setting. Researchers need to ensure that their influence does not supersede that of the main actors in school settings (i.e. teachers and students).

2.5.2 Challenges for the Teacher

Teachers themselves face great challenges in creating conditions for student voice, such as relinquishing power and authority, affording time for such an approach, having their own voice heard and respected as well as receiving additional necessary support. At a deeper level the challenge for the teacher in the classroom is to develop effective learning strategies which allow the diversity of students’ voices to be heard through dialogue so as to expose how their experiences have differed based on their perceived social position relative to others (Fleming, 2015). There are already recognised ways of being a teacher in respective contexts. Often, these involve hegemonic and coercive forces to teach to a narrow curriculum (Pearce & Wood, 2016). Power has been a recurring issue in research and practitioner work about student voice (Mayes et al; 2017). Consulting pupils about teaching and learning is risky and difficult to manage: it has the capacity for destabilizing habitual ways of behaving and familiar patterns of expectation about power issues in teacher-pupil relationships (Rudduck and McIntyre 2007). Students and adults 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 disagreements of opinion especially when adults and young people have opposing views (Mitra, Serriere & Stoicovy, 2012).

The challenges of power and authority, the processes for developing teacher-student partnerships and matters of ownership of the curriculum will necessarily pose more questions than solutions (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2016). Good hearted though the intentions may be in terms of enabling young people to have a voice in their schooling, and in a broader
sense, their education, there are structural features that ensure that the distribution of power is unequal (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015).

**Time** is another challenge facing teachers in Irish post-primary schools. Firstly, developing relationships that lead to meaningful and relevant educational opportunities takes time (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2013). After this, working in negotiated ways with students can take significant time, particularly if a teacher’s decision is to adopt a negotiated approach (Glasby and McDonald, 2004). Oliver (2010) warns that teachers who hope to focus on student voice need to be prepared to spend a great deal of time working with young people if they hope to see below the obvious surface. The question remains; can a teacher make time for negotiation with several classes in planning units of work, given the demands they are already under?

While student voice may be the centre of teacher’s efforts, an important voice which should not be allowed to be usurped in our effort to attend to this is that of the **teacher themselves**. It is arguably impossible for teachers to listen to student voice if their voices have been muted (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2010). After all, if the teacher feels they are not heard, what chance does the student have?

Teachers also need support from **school management** to ensure practices are encouraged and developed throughout the school. A “bottom-up approach” by a teacher is redundant without an appropriate “top down” response (Flynn, 2014). Taking the opportunity to promote a culture of listening and caring is not possible without the support and vision of the school leader and significant personnel (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011). Because of who teachers are, what they know and how they are positioned, they need to be supported in authorizing students’ perspectives and supporting students’ critical engagement (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2013). If teachers are to take on new patterns of interaction and new pedagogies, they will need others (principals, students, staff, academics) to support and listen to them.

2.5.3 Challenges for Students

From a student perspective, the process can also be challenging. With perhaps thousands of hours schooling behind them in which they have ‘practised’ being compliant, ‘being told’ and being managed, to then share in this responsibility can be unwelcome (Glasby and McDonald, 2004). School processes often serve to disempower students (Busher, 2012). A
particular challenge in voice work is to include students whose voices may be difficult to hear. This may be because they are in a minority; they are difficult to understand; they are silenced in and out of school, by choice or by hegemonic or coercive forces; or even because the voices are aggressive, rude or obnoxious (Cook-Sather, 2014; MacBeath, 2006; Taylor & Robinson, 2009). On top of this, rarely have educators bothered to ask the only people who can answer that question, the students, to respond (Cothran, 2010). Using the term “voice” to represent a repositioning of students in educational research and reform also runs the risk of denying the potential power of silence and resistance that students demonstrate (Cook-Sather, 2006; Hadfield & Haw, 2001; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). Truth is constructed and unstable, and the task is one of unravelling the multiple ways in which it is produced, its effects, and the ways subjectivities are enabled and/or constrained in relation to it (Burrows, 2010). Within this work, it is important that students are not met with a tokenistic response because an experience of authentic listening, in which the student is made to feel fairly recognised and respected, has the potential to empower students to actively direct positive change in their school lives and to assume leadership roles in the process (Flynn, 2014).

Cook-Sather (2006) identifies the lengths to which adults need and must go to create conditions for meaningful and sustainable student voice opportunities:

It is one thing to say these words and evoke their (multiple) meanings, but enacting the most radical, transformative versions of them takes more than awareness and commitment; it takes understanding and hard work, consideration and reconsideration, calling into question, and, most important, changing. It requires letting go of what we think we know and entertaining the possibility of profoundly repositioning students in educational research and reform.

(2006, p.381)

Student voice requires young people and adults involved to be truly invested and committed to the concept to ensure that it can bring about genuine and sustainable change. Researchers and teachers make no secret of the challenges and pitfalls that exist in such a process. Nonetheless, although entering the territory of student voice in research is fraught with some difficulty and uncertainty, the end goal of hearing the missing voice of young people is, surely, worth pursuing (Sandford & Duncombe, 2010).
2.5.4 Challenging the Teacher-Student Relationship

Teaching and learning is all about relationships; every element in the learning experience builds around it (Howley & Tannehill, 2014). Often adults either perpetuate hierarchical relationships or assume the other extreme and ‘get out of the way,’ allowing the students to take charge (Camino, 2005). Without an intentional focus on building relationships, student voice can easily become tokenism (Mitra, Sierriere & Stoicovy, 2012). In order for teachers and students to successfully cultivate a culture of dialogue which can then lead on to more intricate levels of student voice, teachers and students need to revise their relationships and allow them to evolve. If the teachers and students are to act and be perceived by each other as real agents of change they need to adapt and re-imagine their relationship in order for a shift in roles and constructive negotiation to occur (Howley & Tannehill, 2014). Without the realisation of a common ground, which affords teachers and students the opportunity to speak and work together it is difficult to expect change within schools looking to facilitate and create student voice. This can only be achieved through the re-imagining of the teacher-student relationship, not just within one subject, but across the entirety of a school.

2.6 Student Voice in Irish Post Primary Education

As a concept, student voice is complex and contested in its positioning within policy and practice as reflected in Irish schools (Fleming 2015). The traditionally hierarchical nature of Irish schools tends to militate against the active participation of all children in decision-making processes (Shevlin & Rose, 2008). Institutionalised practices translated into the Irish post-primary school context are grounded in a discourse that focuses students’ learning on a curriculum and a high stakes external examination that reflects the needs of the economy and the adult world and does not allow genuine consultation with students on decisions about their lives in schools or classrooms (Fleming, 2013). This section looks at how student voice is positioned in Irish post-primary education through policy and practice in the form of national frameworks, longitudinal studies and contemporary efforts to address student voice in Irish post-primary curricula.

While consultation and implementation of the new post primary school frameworks continue, national frameworks also serve as reference points and advocating for students’ right to have their voices heard (Cook-Sather, 2006). However, this does not guarantee that student voice is currently active and meaningful within post primary school curricula. The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 – 2020 (2014) presents the
most contemporary document acknowledging and encouraging the emergence of student voice in Ireland in line with the *United Nations Charter on the Rights of the Child* (1992). The strategy identifies ‘listening to and involving children and young people’ as one of six transformational goals. One the commitments acknowledged within this goal is ‘consultation with children and young people on policies and issues that affect their lives’ as well as the facilitation of “mechanisms to provide children and young people with the opportunity to be heard in primary and post-primary schools through student councils or other age-appropriate mechanisms” (2014, p.32). Up until recently, student councils are seen as an already established “mechanism” for student voice in current post primary school settings.

The growth in student councils in Irish post-primary schools was initially viewed in the context of enabling participation, responsibility and accountability on the part of students and thereby providing an important exercise in democracy (O’Gorman, 1998). However, the extent to which this is the case is questionable (McLoughlin, 2004; Keogh and Whyte, 2005; Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). Recent research into the effectiveness of student councils in facilitating student voice (Fleming, 2013) involved a case-study research on three student councils in Irish post-primary school settings, following student council activities and involvements over one school year. The students demonstrated that they had embraced the language of representation, of a student forum, of advocacy, action and support for students, however their rhetoric and reality varied considerably from that of the student council liaison teachers and the school principals. It was evident that each student council could provide a construct for meaningful participation, pre-figurative democracy and an experience of active citizenship for the students. However, the reality of the students’ experiences reflected tokenistic activity, contrived involvements with decision-making, and a significant focus on school event organisation or charity fundraising. The study concluded that the opportunity for a deep, person-centred student voice reflecting rights, participative democracy and active citizenship was not being realised through the current student council construct in these schools. Fleming (2015) further calls into question the nature in which student councils create conditions for student voice, identifying a number of obstacles hindering its case:

While the policy discourse defines and bounds the operation of the student council in schools, it is clear that the construct has been circumscribed by the power and authority discourses of school management. It is similarly circumscribed by the perceived pressure of curriculum delivery, by internal
and external assessments of students, and by school evaluation, arguably within a performance-orientated and outcomes-driven script that reflects a neoliberal and consumerist agenda for schools and education. In this context, the student council, as a construct for student voice within a right-based, consultative and democratic citizenship perspective, is largely tokenistic and functionally redundant.

(2015, p. 237)

This implies that researchers and policy makers need not only to review the way student councils in schools are used to elicit student voice, but also ensuring additional “mechanisms” through which student voice is evaluated and created throughout school settings, now and in the future, don’t fall into the same trap.

Additional barriers to opportunities for student voice in Post Primary school settings are further recognised by The ERSI’s longitudinal study, Growing up in Ireland (GUI). GUI (Smyth, McCoy & Darmody, 2004; Smyth & Calvert, 2011; Smyth, Banks & Calvert, 2011) followed a cohort of young people, alongside principals, parents and teachers, from their entry to second-level education right up to their final year, eliciting their experiences of post primary school during this period. Representing the largest study conducted involving the voice of young people in Irish post-primary schools of its time, it provides insight into the nature of students’ school experiences, teacher student relationships, and the altering shifts towards assessment and performance within school climates. Over and above the influence of the school’s approach to handling the transition process, school climate, that is the nature of interaction among teachers and students in the school, appears to play a significant role in influencing not only student attitudes to school but students’ own view of themselves (Smyth, McCoy & Darmody, 2004). Respect and care were seen as part and parcel of good teaching by students (Smyth, Banks & Calvert, 2011). Opportunities for students to elicit their voice were identified, but limited. TY students are more likely to engage in activity-based learning within class, with a greater use of project work and group work, more frequent use of computer and audio/video facilities, and a greater chance to have a say in what happens in class. In contrast, learning in fifth year classes tends to be more teacher dominated and homework-based (Smyth & Calvert, 2011). Yet, in Senior Cycle, students often commented that teachers treated them more as ‘adults’ and with more respect than in previous years. They also reported being ‘listened to’ on a more frequent basis and being spoken to as equals (ibid, 2011). Despite this, according to students, senior cycle subjects tended to be more
teacher-centred rather than involving the kinds of active teaching methods which students found most engaging. The studies implicate that curriculum reform is unlikely to be successful unless it is underpinned by a change in the culture and climate of schools. Implications suggest that such a change could “enhance student engagement and provide young people with richer educational experiences as a preparation for adult life” (ibid, p. 237, 2011). While the ESRI longitudinal study elicited the voice of post primary students, providing invaluable contributions that should help inform future curriculum and framework, it did so to inform adults. Yet, the findings highlight the importance of students as active informants, suggesting a need for further exploration and involvement of students’ voices - not only in reflecting on their learning experiences, but in shaping them also.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment’s (NCCA) work to reform the Junior Cycle includes a current commitment to ensuring student voice is implemented within the framework as well as future curriculum reform. The Framework for Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2015) emphasises the importance of valuing, acknowledging and affirming all the students’ learning opportunities and experiences during the three years of junior cycle. Backed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Framework (NCCA, 2015) aims to ensure that the student “communicates effectively using a variety of means in a range of contexts” and “values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts” (p. 12, 2015). Collaborative research between Trinity College Dublin and the NCCA supported by the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) is eliciting students’ perspectives on developments in the Junior Cycle in relation to curriculum and assessment (Flynn, In Press, 2017). The NCCA has outlined its commitment to student voice through this research. The purpose of this project has been two-fold. Firstly, to consult students as experts on their own experience of learning and to incorporate their insights in this opportunity for curricular co-construction. Secondly, to refine the way in which we consult with students to ensure that their experience of the process is empowering and their capacity to contribute in a meaningful way is maximised. The outcome of this research will influence how student voice can be included in planning such that there is an embedded culture of ‘shared language’, ‘co-construction’ and a strategy that will provide a sustainable structure and response to student voice for schools and the NCCA (Learner Voice Conference, 2015). Such commitments, research initiatives and reform would suggest that student voice is set to become a central facet of current and future curriculum.
Adding to the ever-growing list of research carried out eliciting the voices of young people in Ireland is that of Devine et. al.’s (2017) ‘So, how was school today?’ report for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Department of Education and Skills. More than 3,200 young voices had their say, focusing on how young people experience teaching and learning in school, their feelings about school, as well as their views on services and facilities in school. The findings state that although “government policy is clear that children and young people should have a say in matters that directly affect them and that they should be empowered to express their views […] the survey highlights the lack of voice young people have in school [indicating] that they would like to have more of a say” (2017, p. 28). The findings suggest that although policy makers are gradually moving towards greater facilitation and advocacy of student voice, as reflected in recent curricular developments, the manner in which this currently plays out and is being implemented across the entirety of Irish post-primary schools is still imperceptible.

### 2.7 Student Voice in Physical Education

There has been limited research on student voice in Physical Education settings (Fisette 2013). While this may be the case, this section highlights recent studies in the United States, United Kingdom and Ireland which have illustrated both the lack of attention given to students’ voices as well as the benefits of promoting and allowing student involvement in the shaping of their Physical Education environments.

Brooker and McDonald (1999) investigated how student “voice” has been positioned in curriculum innovation, drawing on an evaluation of Physical Education in senior secondary schools in Australia. This study involved both teachers and students’ perceptions of Physical Education and the design of the curriculum. They found that “school subjects clearly place teachers at the centre” (1999, p. 90), alienating the voice of the student. They stated that “student voice could have informed the development of the subject in ways that other stakeholders could not” (1999, p. 92) providing further argument for the need for teachers and adults to listen to students and gain their perceptions to make Physical Education more meaningful, developmentally appropriate and worthwhile to the students.

Fisette (2013) explored how American secondary-school girls, identified and critiqued self-identified barriers to their engagement in and enjoyment of Physical Education and navigated these barriers and the unequal power relations they encountered to “thrive or survive” in Physical Education (p. 184, 2013). Through dialogue and questioning, the
participants were able to speak about their self-identified barriers and perceived experiences. Although the participants experienced these barriers, they were able to embody their comfort and enjoyment of Physical Education by handling their levels of participation within particular contexts and situations in Physical Education settings. Findings demonstrated the importance for teachers and researchers to, firstly, access and authorize student voices to identify students' self-identified barriers and unequal problem relations and, secondly, respond to their voices by engaging in transformative practices and becoming active agents of change (Fisette, 2013).

Cothran (2010) examined American students’ values of Physical Education and how those values were met, or not, by different curricula. Her project also explored how students attempt to influence the curriculum through their actions. The study found that although students rarely have a formal role in course curricular development, their values still shape the curriculum through informal, but powerful avenues. The study suggested that students should play a formal and authentic role in curricular construction to ensure that open communication representing the student value perspective is part of the formal curricular process. With that inclusion, it may be possible to create a curricular path of mutual worth from which all students can benefit, and that allows them to enjoy and find meaning in the class (Cothran, 2010). Without the inclusion of students’ voices, the delivery of curricular units of Physical Education can be challenging for teachers and disengaging for students.

Lamb & Lane (2013) conducted a small-scale qualitative study consulting UK Year 10 and 11 students in Physical Education about being on the gifted and talented register, the demands of their academic work, academic support available to them and what could support them in the future. By focusing on the views of the young people themselves, this study raised questions as to whether more effective ways need to be explored to incorporate the individual needs of such pupils within and beyond the Physical Education curriculum. The voices of those who experienced the scheme provided significant insights into possible ways forward for supporting gifted and talented students not just within Physical Education, but within school settings. Among these, opportunities for dialogue and support from teachers as well as tailoring their learning experiences are mentioned. Such an approach can help not only provide insight into “gifted and talented” students’ perceptions of Physical Education within the greater school setting, but homogenous students also.

Sandford and Duncombe (2010) presented four selected projects conducted in the UK with a view to presenting a possible research approach that could allow for a genuine
representation of young people’s voices in Physical Education alongside other physical activity settings. They argued that the approach taken to student voice is “often tokenistic in nature because young people’s contributions tend to be directed, structured and limited by external, adult-led, research agenda” (p. 66, 2010). Their reflections indicate that involving young people in decision making and identifying research questions, and providing opportunities to share findings with adults/decision makers is vital in future Physical Education and physical activity projects, not just with disaffected youth, but indeed all youth.

Student voice in Physical Education in an Irish context is limited and relatively new. Enright (2010) presented a new approach to student voice through a variety of methodologies which helped a group of disengaged girls re-imagine and invest in a Physical Education program which “placed themselves at the centre and challenged former Physical Education curricular boundaries” (2010, p. 10). Her findings highlight calls for a more radical approach to facilitating and promoting student voice in Irish Post Primary Physical Education stating that:

Adult allies (teachers and researchers, and teachers as researchers) who support student voice work need to be open to the shift in roles, responsibilities and identities propelled by a real commitment to hearing students.

(Enright, 2010, p. 201)

Examples of these shifts in roles included: Teacher as director to teacher as facilitator/guide; researcher as expert to student as expert and co-constructor of the research agenda; and student as passive recipient of learning to student as active constructor of knowledge and curriculum (Enright 2010). This study emphasises that unless we adapt and embrace such “shifts in roles, responsibilities and identities”, we are unlikely to experience and create change in the way in which we, as adults and teachers, listen to students and create conditions for student voice in the future. Furthermore, if teachers are to take on new patterns of interaction and new pedagogies, they will need others (principals, students, staff) to support and listen to them (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2010).

Howley & Tannehill (2014) investigated Irish Senior Cycle students’ views on their involvement in a process of curriculum negotiation and implementation and how the methodologies they experienced affected their investment in and ownership of the Physical Education curriculum in an urban co-educational comprehensive school. Participants engaged in negotiation and discussion pertaining to their Physical Education experiences as well as
selecting, implementing and participating in a variety of activities and a student designed curriculum unit. Once again, the findings suggest that curricula constructed by and with students as opposed to for them can increase their investment and ownership and evoke responsibility rather than disengagement and alienation in a Post Primary Physical Education setting. Because the experience was more relevant to the class, the resistance to participation and engagement was minimal and opportunities for decision making and responsibility increased students’ ownership and investment in their classes. Opportunities for effectively eliciting student voice and student involvement in negotiation requires teachers and students to experience a shift from traditionally perceived roles to more collegiate, innovative, facilitative and constructive roles in Physical Education. In particular, it heightened respect and cooperation among teachers and students, valuing each other’s perspectives and the considerations that needed to be acknowledged in selecting, negotiating and implementing activities (Howley & Tannehill, 2014). A number of implications for practice were identified including “increased awareness of student voice and what it can offer to teachers in terms of a pedagogical approach to curriculum design” as well as “increased dialogue and collegiality between students, teachers and curriculum makers” (p. 413, 2014). Both studies serve not only to highlight the potential and promise student voice has to offer to contemporary Irish post-primary Physical Education settings, but indeed across the school curriculum also.

To meet the ever-changing needs and interests of students, it is imperative that Physical Education curricula and programmes continue to evolve (El-Sherif, 2014). One of the obvious implications from students’ perspective research is the need for teachers to understand how all their students (of all abilities, genders and races) feel about their Physical Education programmes (Dyson, 2006). While the above studies provide significant insight into how this occurs in Physical Education settings, the confined body of work available only serves to highlight the need for further research in student voice in Physical Education, particularly in an Irish post primary context.

2.8 Contemporary Student Voice Initiatives in Ireland

It appears that much research in Ireland has been conducted “on” as opposed to “with” students (Enright, 2010). However, innovative approaches to overcoming such obstacles have begun to emerge in recent years, providing concrete examples of an increased confidence in pupils where teachers have implemented specific programmes to aid the development of
communication skills (Shevlin & Rose, 2008). This section outlines one such initiative that has taken place in Ireland across the post primary school setting.

Flynn (2014) explored the outcomes and implications of a small-scale student voice research project conducted in the Republic of Ireland. Twenty student participants in mainstream education were consulted on their experience of school, all of whom had been identified as at risk of educational exclusion or with internalising or externalising behaviours associated with the classification of ‘social, emotional and behavioural difficulties’.

Engagement in dialogue, in conjunction with experiencing praise, success and acknowledgement, substantially improved relations between students and teachers (Flynn, 2014). The data gathered from focus groups and interviews helped inform researchers and participants about what strategies and interventions could best engage students in a positive manner within their schools. Flynn’s findings echo the notion that careful and meaningful elicitation of student voice is central to innovative learning for both students and teachers:

This evidence suggests that a student voice approach to supporting young people is fundamental to the development of an inclusive learning environment for the benefit of all students. An education system which promotes inclusive principles should encourage a culture of listening. Schools need to hear not just the “articulate” voice (Bourdieu, 1977), but rather, the expert voice of all young people in their own schools in the pursuit of inclusive education.

(Flynn, 2014, p. 173)

The analysis suggests that carefully crafted and school supported student voice initiatives such as this can impact learning amongst any demographic in Ireland, not just those pupils affected by social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. In order to advance this, further student voice research initiatives need to be conducted in post primary settings.

While the Flynn’s work represents a new departure in student voice initiatives in post-primary schools, there remains a lack of research based evidence to espouse creating conditions for student voice in Irish schools. Until further research is published, the chasm between theory and actual practice on the ground at the coal face of Irish post-primary schools remains.
2.9 Embracing Participatory Methodologies in Research and Pedagogy

This section focuses on the need for teachers and researcher to embrace contemporary methodologies for both research and pedagogy when attempting to engage and elicit student voice. To get student views heard and understood, forums for listening have to be appropriated and created anew (Cook-Sather, 2006). Central to the studies already presented, is an acknowledgement that innovative methodologies and strategies are necessary when engaging with student voice as a researcher and, a teacher. The gathering of qualitative data involving students’ voices has heavily relied on methodologies such as focus groups and interviews. Using established qualitative research methods in new ways allows researchers and teachers to consider what ‘listening to’ might look like and involve (Gallagher & Lortie, 2007). This in turn creates learning tools for pedagogy in the classroom setting.

Participatory methodologies are creative tools, which when used ethically can facilitate participants in producing rich, multi-layered data and bring participants and researchers closer to critical engagement with participants’ lived experiences (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2012). Such methods can facilitate participants in finding their own language to articulate what they know and help them put words to their ideas and share understandings of their worlds, thereby giving participants more control over the research process (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2012). While such methods can help in data collection, they can also be effectively used a learning tools for teachers and procedures contributing to qualitative data collection in the study.

Examples of participatory methods include student-led photography, mapping exercises, student-led tours, role-play exercises, drama, music, dance, diary keeping, collage, model-making, storytelling, print journalism and radio production (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). Selection of research methods and strategies must come with “an awareness of the choices we have regarding how much of former versions to keep as we forge new versions” (Cook-Sather, p. 363, 2013). Student Voice is not fixed, it is variably unique and positioned within the context of the lives of the students involved. This requires researchers, teachers and students to vary their engagement methods and strategies to suit the context.

Teachers and researchers need to radically embrace and engage with our students in new ways cooperatively to challenge disengagement with curricula to develop one that fosters responsibility, ownership and meaning onto those who engage with it (Howley &
Tannehill, 2014). If the spirit of the legislation in England and Ireland is to be upheld, it is necessary to adopt a similarly assertive approach to researching approaches which increase pupil autonomy (Shevlin & Rose, 2008). If this is to be the case, then teachers experiencing, applying and embracing more participatory methods must be a priority in student voice related research. This, in turn, leads to a considered extension of possibilities regarding what methodologies researchers use to enable young people to find a voice.

2.10 Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review was to examine how researchers explore how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice first and foremost, and then within the context of Physical Education based on national and international examples and contemporary approaches to student voice research. Based on the evidence presented in the literature, there is a clear need to investigate the topic further to promote, advance and modify the concept as well as the methodologies that have already shown to be successful in eliciting students’ voices and bringing about real change within their educational settings. Student voice holds significant promise if it is approached with authentic motives and proceeds with an ethos of care and compassion (Pearce & Wood, 2016); further investigation can only serve to inform us greater on how this can be done.

It is generally agreed that children occupy an ambivalent position within Irish society (Shevlin & Rose, 2008). One of the ways in which schools can improve their learning climate is by giving a voice to students (OECD, 2017). It is well documented that conducting research with young people in ways that generate authentic youth voices is fraught with challenges (Sandford & Duncombe, 2010). However, if schools are for and about students, then the way forward in how educators (teachers, parents, curriculum writer, coaches, etc.) work with young people is clear. Physical education processes, among others need to adopt a more student centred and student negotiated approach to teaching and learning (Glasby and McDonald, 2004).

While, much of the research substantiates and promotes student voice internationally, the lack of autonomy given to pupils continues to exist in the context of the Irish primary and secondary education systems and is played out on a national basis. While there is a small and emerging literature base on student voice in post primary Physical Education, we still do not know much about the benefits or challenges associated with this kind of work in the Irish setting and how physical educators might be supported.
in facilitating students’ active participation in ‘authentic listening’. Slowly, we are beginning to see greater acknowledgment by policy makers of the role student voice has to play within current and future Irish curricula (NCCA, 2015), supporting and implementing a genuine directive for student voice. The opportunities, challenges and contestation of student voice within policy and practice in Irish Education therefore continue (Fleming, 2015). There is a need for research to consider ways in which students can reflect, discuss and critique their Physical Education and cross curricular experiences and subsequently examine the impact this has on their learning.

Timkin and Watson (2010, p. 139) argue that “little real or substantive improvement will occur in teaching, in student learning, and specifically in the moral fibre of our lives and the lives of students (and others), without a drastic reconceptualization of our purpose as educators, and specifically as educators”. Recognizing students as active agents, researchers, and curriculum makers necessitates the construction of an entirely different set of relationships to the ones that currently characterize how many teachers and students do Physical Education, and indeed education generally (Enright & O Sullivan, 2010). If curriculum makers and teachers are to have any hope of successfully designing and implementing successful and student centred Physical Education curricula, they need to investigate and explore if such curricula can be successfully implemented on a preliminary and evaluated basis using innovative methodologies, before disseminating and implementing them in a national context.

Experience tells us that Physical Education teachers and researchers have heart, and care deeply about student experiences and learning (Enright, 2010). By investigating how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in Irish Post Primary Physical Education, we can provide more evidence and advocacy which can serve to inform us on how future Physical Education and, indeed, additional curricular experiences, can be designed to facilitate and hearten student voice.
Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the qualitative methods through which I, as the researcher, shaped the study based on the context and participants, the experiences constructed, the processes of data collection and analysis, and how trustworthiness was ensured. Firstly, it presents the qualitative framework within which the research was designed and implemented. It provides a context within which the study is based, and the participants involved. It then identifies the methodological procedures through which the study evolved and progressed. It presents and rationalises the data collection instruments. It also explains the process through which the accumulated data were collected and analysed to gain objective findings for further discussion.

3.2 Beliefs and Experiences Grounding the Study

Epistemological beliefs relate to the nature and scope of knowledge, including how it can be acquired and what is and can be known. (Olsson, Cruickshank & Collins, 2017). Such beliefs are fundamental to how researchers, teachers, and students engage themselves and each other in teaching and learning. One of the most effective means of tracing one’s ontological stance in the present is to re-write their foundational narratives of the past (Alberti et al., 2013). Yet, while I would regard myself as a constructivist, it is difficult for me to pinpoint how I arrived at this point as a teacher and a researcher – it is something which has occurred fortuitously as much as by design.

Teaching is something I take immense pride and satisfaction in; it motivates and challenges me in new ways always. I have always questioned the ways in which I can improve my pedagogical approach. Central to this is the idea of allowing students to have a say in their learning as well as the development and maintenance of positive constructive relationships with them. The work of Enright & O’ Sullivan (2010; 2012; 2013), given its local context in Ireland and, having been tutored by the former, unquestionably rubbed off on me. Enright’s passionate advocacy of student voice, a relatively new phenomenon in Irish education, and PAR as a ‘pedagogy of possibility’ within Irish Post-Primary Physical Education lit a flame of further inquiry within me. Since my early days as an undergraduate, I
have consistently advocated the concept of student voice alongside student involvement in negotiating the curriculum. I firmly believe that students should be at the centre of their educational experiences. However, such an idealistic vision soon became diluted once I graduated and began working in multiple post-primary settings as I found myself struggling to manifest such an approach to working with students in my own teaching. Now, in hindsight, my commitment to listening and speaking to my students was not bolstered by an in-depth grounding in theory and practice let alone an ability to effectively analyse and critique my own beliefs. Enacting the most radical, transformative versions of student voice takes more than awareness and commitment; it takes understanding and hard work, consideration and reconsideration, calling into question, and, most important, changing (Cook-Sather, 2006). This required me to let go of what I thought was right and clearly defined, and instead entertaining the notion of repositioning myself and my students in research which could lead to a greater understanding of student voice. Assimilating into traditional and non-student-centred practices I had previously railed against frustrated me, and caused me to further question how the now relatively small theory base and literature I had come to appreciate was not translating into in the day-to-day proceedings of my classes and interactions with others – I needed to find out more.

Having conducted a previous study on student voice as an undergraduate (Howley & Tannehill, 2014), I wanted to explore further how other teachers evaluated and created conditions for student voice in Irish Post Primary Education. This led me back to part-time research. However, I wanted to do so not only within the context of my own setting, but alongside other teachers who wanted to improve the way they worked with their students. I wanted to share student voice with teachers without enforcing it, knowing, now in hindsight, how hard it can be to practice what you preach. Physical Education teachers, teachers and pre-service teachers need to have the mettle and faith to engage with students in radical collegiality in an effort to put students, their interests and their growth at the centre of educational and curricular experiences going forward (Howley & Tannehill, 2014). This meant that for this study, I sought to place myself equally alongside the participants in trying to find ways in which we, as teachers and students, could create conditions for student voice that were simple and accessible. In doing so, I hoped firstly to inform ourselves on how best this could be done and the types of challenges that might be faced, which in turn could help inform others willing to embrace it meaningfully. By using Physical Education as the initial
starting point for this, I hoped to extend such an approach into other subjects, such as English and Gaeilge (Irish), and across post-primary school settings outside of the classroom.

### 3.3 Qualitative Framework

Qualitative research is “orientated towards analysing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity and starting from people’s expressions and activities in their local contexts” (Flick, 2005, p. 13). It is often motivated by a desire to understand individuals’ lived experience (Maitlis, 2017). It can provide educational researchers, teachers and students opportunities to better see the worlds they occupy through action research. Qualitative work requires reflection on the part of the researcher, both before and during the research process, as a way of providing context and understanding for readers (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In doing so, it seeks to understand and represent lived experiences and understandings, making it a suitable research approach for a study such as this.

While offering greater insight into how schools function and issues that arise, qualitative research also provides challenges to researchers such as: considering the broader societal context; using appropriate and rigorous methods; protecting participants from harm; respecting individuality; maintaining confidentiality; managing disclosures; establishing rapport; using clear questions; and, avoid imposing one’s own views (Kirk, 2007). Indeed, it seems unlikely that one could select, enter, observe, and write up a study that is exclusively descriptive without tacitly endorsing unmentioned ethical stances about the educational settings in which one is researching (Cooley, 2013). In meeting such challenges as a researcher, Clark & Sousa (2017) identify several skills needed for effective qualitative research, among them: knowing your literature; working well with others; and bringing your work alive to people and communities. When conducted properly, bearing closely in mind the required challenges and considerations, qualitative research can allow us to access in depth detailed descriptions of some of the most intimate human experiences (Ummell & Achille, 2016). In carefully adopting a qualitative approach, and following a carefully laid research design which embodied ethical consideration and reliable methodologies, I intended to seek out, understand and analyse the different perspectives that could be obtained through the unique “lenses” of the participants within the respective contexts of Woodville, Millbrook and Kinloch.
3.4 Research Design

The following section presents the process through which the research was designed and implemented. The study adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach within a comparative case-study of three Irish post-primary schools.

3.4.1 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Reason (1998) defines Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a qualitative research perspective that sees people “co creating their reality through participation; through their experience; their imagination and intuition, their thinking and their action” (1998, p. 262). The features of PAR (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000) offered an aligning platform to engage with the diversity of participants in the research process:

1. PAR involves a spiral of self-reflective cycles of planning, acting and reflecting
2. PAR is a social process
3. PAR is participatory
4. PAR is practical and collaborative
5. PAR is emancipatory
6. PAR is critical
7. PAR is recursive (reflexive, dialectical)
8. PAR aims to transform both theory and practice

(Pg. 595-600)

There are several profound and sympathetic connections between constructivist inquiry and PAR; much of the epistemological, ontological and axiological belief system is the same or similar, and methodologically, constructivists and action researchers work in similar ways. (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). By their basic nature, both constructivism and PAR are designed to “foster reciprocal mutual learning” among participants (McTaggart, 1991; Udas, 1998), striving for the creation of valuable and real educational experiences which are representative of the world in which they are found.

Fielding (2015) identified the need ‘to place the participatory tradition of democracy at the heart of all that we do in schools: if democracy matters it must be seen to matter’. This study, by its very nature, looked to challenge the norms of the participants’ lives, with them
at the front of this. In order to facilitate students in seeing the ‘givens’ in Physical Education as ‘contingencies’ and better positioning them to imagine alternatives, efforts need to be made using a PAR pedagogy in Physical Education to introduce “unfamiliar perspectives” and thereby broaden horizons (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2010).

While the rationale for selecting PAR was grounded in these principles, it is important to recognise that such an approach is not without considered limitations. A common criticism of PAR is that it is a ‘soft’ method of research (Young 2006); ambiguous, untraceable and too open-ended. PAR is grounded ‘in the recognition that expertise and knowledge are widely distributed’ and ‘assumes that those who have been most systematically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences, and the fracture points in socially unjust arrangements’ (Fine, 2008, pg. 215). This suggests that the data gathered may be, by its very nature, unrelatable and incontestable. Indeed, it is possible for researchers to situate themselves within such research and not address issues of social justice in question (Mertens, 2010). This might lead to misunderstandings about the participants’ perceptions and the issue being addressed, as well as disagreement about the understandings and analysis of the research. This can make it difficult for researchers to legitimise their work. Given the potential complexities which may exist, PAR requires sensitivity to the relationship between ‘insiders’ (in this case the teachers and students in their respective schools) and ‘outsiders’ (the researcher) (Mackenzie et. al, 2012). Another consideration is time constraints on PAR collaborators: In a research approach such as this that emphasizes participant involvement over two school years, how does one involve collaborators, especially students, without overwhelming them (Fletcher, MacPhee & Dickson, 2017)?

While PAR may have to prove legitimacy to other, more conventional research methods, research open to explorations of difference through participation is still relevant and warranted (Balakrishnan & Claiborne, 2017). Fielding (2012), advocates the need to develop schools and other institutions of education that take participatory traditions of democracy more seriously. Such participatory traditions require participatory research methods. Using PAR to spearhead the approach of creating conditions for student voice in the Physical Education curriculum, collecting data in the process, I set about implementing the research methods into the context of the study by engaging students collaboratively, critically and reflectively in an effort to transform their experiences. This occurred through the focus groups and one-on-one interviews.
3.4.2 Comparative Case Study

Comparative case studies are undertaken over a period of time, focusing on comparison within and across different contexts. Comparative case studies involve the analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences and patterns across two or more cases that share a common focus or goal (Goodrick, 2014). For the purpose of this study, three Irish post-primary schools were selected as individual case studies using convenience sampling to participate in order to gather and compare data which could lead to more extensive conceptual exploration of student voice throughout Irish post-primary schools.

3.4.3 Ethical Considerations and Selection of Participants

The researcher sought and was granted permission to conduct this study by the University of Limerick Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The “convenience sampling procedure” (Cooksey & McDonald, 2011) was used in selecting the participants to allow for ease in accessibility to both the teachers and their cohort of students. This meant that the researcher selected the teachers based on previous experience of having studied and taught alongside them and knowing that they were open to change and exploring their pedagogical approach to Physical Education and how they worked with their students. Once they agreed to participate, they in turn selected their respective cohort of students based on who they believed were willing to participate in a study which would directly impact their regular Physical Education classes alongside approval of their consent. Advantages to this sampling procedure included the availability of participants, the ease with which participation could be observed and monitored, and the quickness with which the data could be gathered for analysis (Kivunja, 2015). Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, with the option not to participate in the study clearly stated. Parental consent was acquired for students. They were also informed that to safeguard their privacy, their names and schools would be given pseudonyms and would not be divulged. If they chose to participate in the study, they were to indicate their consent by completing a written consent form. While such an approach could be viewed as bias and allowing for a skewed selection, it also afforded participants a degree of responsibility in shaping the research process.
3.5 Context

The research centred on a small cluster of three practicing physical education teachers (including the researcher) and their respective students in investigating how they evaluate and create conditions for student voice in their Physical Education classes. This section provides the context within which the study was completed under the following headings: the schools; the students; the physical education teachers; the teacher-researcher; and the physical education curriculum. All schools and participants are given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

3.5.1 The Schools

The study was conducted in three post primary schools in Ireland; Woodville, Millbrook and Kinloch. Woodville is a voluntary Catholic girls post-primary school based in County Dublin. The operation of the school is overseen by its Board of Management and its respective religious order. The school consists of approximately 45 staff and 670 students. Milbrook is a co-educational post-primary Gaelscoil, where all subjects are taught through the medium of Gaeilge (Irish), based in County Limerick. The operation of the school is overseen by its Board of Management and the local Education and Training Board. The school consists of approximately 60 staff and 750 students. Kinloch is a voluntary Catholic boys post-primary school based in County Dublin. The operation of the school is overseen by its Board of Management and its respective religious order. The school consists of approximately 40 staff and 520 students.

Most students in all three schools were from their respective local catchment area, representing middle-class socio-economic demographics. Pupil enrolment in all three schools was based on detailed selection criteria as the demand was more than what the schools could accommodate. Entry criteria included the primary school attended, whether the pupil lived in the local catchment area and whether the pupil had family members who previously attended the school. The schools engaged with junior and senior cycle subjects and curricula alongside engaging with many extra-curricular activities.

3.5.2 The Students

The study was centred on a selected 3rd Year cohort of students from a designated class in each of the three schools. The student cohort in each school was selected by the respective
teacher. Selection was based on which cohort teachers felt offered breadth in ability, dispositions and levels of participation in Physical Education. Timetabling and accessibility were also considered, which meant that Senior Cycle cohorts were not considered. It was also decided that first year cohorts would not be selected as they had only been in their schools for a short period of time.

In Woodville, the cohort was composed of 28 students, all girls. In Milbrook, the class was composed of 30 students (Boys/Girls). In Kinloch, the class was composed of 28 boys. The ages of the student cohort ranged from 15 to 16 years of age. Students were of mixed ability, with some pupils who possessed physical and learning disabilities. All students were active participants in the Physical Education classes. From the class cohort, the teacher selected students to participate in the focus group interviews. This selection was based on the teacher’s belief as to which students could provide the most scope and reflection of the student cohort, and who were willing to participate in the procedure.

3.5.3 The Physical Education Teachers

The Physical Education teachers, Ms. Brown (Woodville) and Mr. Green (Milbrook) had been teaching Physical Education alongside their elective subject of Gaeilge (Irish) for five years. Both teachers had resided in their respective schools for four of those five years, working within established Physical Education departments which included two to three additional more experienced Physical Education teachers alongside them.

Having trained and practiced with Ms. Brown and Mr. Green, I could see that they were enthusiastic and passionate about Physical Education and committed to their students’ development. They were committed to creating learning experiences for their students that lead them to become intrinsically motivated to perform physical activity and enjoy the subject. As regular participants in CPD, when invited to participate in this study they saw it as an opportunity to further extend their knowledge base of student voice as well as finding ways of how such an approach could be implemented meaningfully within Physical Education and additional post-primary settings. They saw the potential the study could bring their Physical Education classes and were constructively and reflectively involved with the students and teacher-researcher throughout.
3.5.4 The Teacher-Researcher

As the Teacher-Researcher, I had been teaching Physical Education alongside my elective subject of English for five years, working in Kinloch for three of those five years, where I was Head of the Physical Education Department. I had been actively involved in furthering my knowledge and understanding of student voice with a view to working with others in finding ways to create conditions in Irish-Post Primary settings.

3.5.5 The Physical Education Curriculum

Students in all three schools were taught the Junior Cycle Physical Education Curriculum (JCPE) by their respective teachers. Devised in 2003 by the Department of Education and Skill and the NCCA, the JCPE recommends that four activities, or strands, be taught each year of the three years of junior cycle from a selection of seven strands (adventure activities, aquatics, athletics, dance, games, gymnastics and health-related activity). The modes of assessments suggested for the junior cycle include formal assessment by the teacher, informal observation by the teacher, peer assessment, and self-assessment (MacPhail & Murphy, 2017). Each group had one 80-minute period of Physical Education per week composed of two regular class periods combined.

3.6 Critical Lenses

This study focused on exploring how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in Irish post primary Physical Education. In my five years as a Physical Education and English teacher I have come to appreciate the potential student voice has to offer within the classroom. When setting about investigating the topic, I wanted to ensure that I was being systematic. This required careful consideration of the methodologies, and the way in which I set about gaining insights and data from the various participants in the study.

Brookfield (1995) identified four reflective lenses which can serve teachers in becoming critically reflective in their practices: our autobiographies as learners and teachers; our students’ eyes; our colleagues’ experiences; and the theoretical literature. Although my role first and foremost was that of a teacher-researcher, I used these lenses as a starting point to help both participants and myself in eliciting our own unique experiences and ideas surrounding student voice to gain an overall understanding of their experiences. Through my reflection journal, I tried to reflect on my own experiences of learning and teaching to
establish where it was I stood regarding student voice. By eliciting Ms. Brown, Mr. Green and our students to speak about their previous experiences of Physical Education and student voice as well as what occurred during this study through the focus groups and interviews, I tried to understand what things looked like through their eyes. Immersing myself in the growing collection of student voice studies and literature meant that I was developing a deeper understanding of what was happening within this study and how it compared to what had preceded it.

3.7 Measurement Procedures

Given the qualitative nature of the research, methods for data collection were needed to track the thoughts and actions of the participants throughout the entire engagement process to purposefully understand, critique and analyse the collected data. These sources of data were focus group interviews, one-on-one interviews, a Teacher-Researcher reflection journal, and student written reflections. These are explained in detail below.

3.7.1 Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews were used to “gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher [could] develop insights into how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1995, p. 96). Interviewing is an especially helpful way for teachers to learn about students’ perceptions of their programs (Graham, 1995). In this study it was the world of the Physical Education teachers, the Teacher-Researcher and their respective students’ Physical Education classes that I wanted to probe and investigate.

A cohort of Students were selected conscientiously by Ms. Brown, Mr. Green and I through convenience sampling of our respective cohorts to participate in three focus group interviews. This was done with a view to capturing the broad range of mixed ability voices of students, from those who we felt were confident in communicating and participating in Physical Education to those who we perceived as quiet, unforthcoming and somewhat detached from Physical Education. Each focus group had between four and eight participants. The participants, unless absent, remained the same for each focus group. Criteria for the selection of each group centred on ensuring that we could represent the varying voices of each, with teachers selecting the students they believed best represented the breadth of voice within their cohort. Selection was also decided on the willingness of selected students to
consent to the procedure and who wanted to contribute. The focus group interviews intended for students to discuss their attitudes, perceptions and experiences of student voice within Physical Education in the junior cycle and during the engagement period. The first and third sets of focus group interviews took place outside of Physical Education classes during the school day in an appointed room in each school, and were conducted by me, as the researcher. The second set of focus group interviews also took place outside of Physical Education classes during the school day in an appointed room and were conducted by the students’ respective teachers - Ms. Brown, Mr. Green and the Teacher-Researcher.

For the student focus group interviews, a list of open ended questions was given to the students. These questions prompted students to reflect and critique their experiences of Physical Education in the school before, during and after the engagement period. These helped guide the interviews and engage students in specific areas of reflection and thought on how conditions for student voice were evaluated and created within their classes. The first focus group interviews (Appendix B), at pre-engagement, intended to establish if and how teachers facilitated student voice within Physical Education prior to the study. It also intended to elicit students’ thoughts on what changes they would like to see in their Physical Education classes and the roles they saw themselves and the teacher playing in this. For the second focus group interview (Appendix C), the purpose of the questions was to allow students to reflect on the changes in presentation and practice that had occurred in the early stages of classroom engagement and evaluate the impact this had on their Physical Education experiences. They were also asked to further critique their Physical Education experience and offer their thoughts on how they saw it progressing and whether such an approach was sustainable or not. For the third set of student focus group interviews (Appendix D) pupils reflected on their overall experiences during the study, the changes that had occurred in presentation and practice, and the significance the experience had for future practice and sustainability of student voice within their schools.

Along with the student focus group interviews, Ms. Brown, Mr. Green, and the Teacher Researcher participated in a focus group interview (Appendix F) during the engagement period. This focus group took place outside of the school day in an appointed room in the University of Limerick and was conducted by a PESS faculty member with experience in facilitating focus group interviews. The purpose of this focus group was to elicit teachers’ thoughts on the changes they had made to presentation and practice within their Physical Education classes and the impact this had from their perspective. It also asked
them to consider how they expected to engage with their students while in the study and in the future with student voice.

### 3.7.2 One-on-One Interviews

Ms. Brown and Mr. Green participated in two one-on-one interviews with me, Teacher-Researcher, at the beginning and end of the study to give their evaluations of the experience at the beginning and end of the study. The interviews took place at Ms. Brown and Mr. Green’s respective schools. The questions used to guide discussion in the interview were based closely on those which had been asked to students, but from their perspective as teachers. The first one-on-one interview took place at the pre-engagement phase (Appendix E) and intended for the Ms. Brown and Mr. Green. The purpose of this interview was to discuss their attitudes, perceptions and experiences of student voice in Physical Education with students prior to the study and their thoughts on how student voice could be created within their classes during the engagement period. The second one-on-one interviews (Appendix G) took place during the post-engagement period. The purpose of these interviews was to elicit Ms. Brown and Mr. Green’s thoughts on their overall experiences during the study, the changes that had occurred in their presentation and practice, and the significance the experience had for future practice and sustainability of student voice within their schools.

I then participated in a one-on-one interview at the end of the study in an appointed room in the University of Limerick which was conducted by a PESS faculty member with experience in facilitating interviews and was guided by the same questions Ms. Brown and Mr. Green had been (Appendix G).

### 3.7.3 Teacher-Researcher Reflection Journal

Pavlovich (2007) sees reflection as a key element of journal writing, helping the writer “to stand outside the experience, to see it more objectively, and to become detached from the emotional outcomes” (p. 284). Moon (1999) sees the learning journal as “essentially a vehicle for reflection” (p.4). A Teacher-Researcher Reflection Journal was maintained and updated by me throughout the study. Viewing my reflections helped alert me to potential distorted or incomplete assumptions that required further investigation as well as new and emerging observations (Brookfield, 1995). This journal was typed up using Microsoft Word. This created a “permanent record of thoughts and experience and a safe outlet for personal
concerns” (Spalding & Wilson, 2002, p. 1397) on what I had felt and experienced at different stages of the research both inside and outside of Physical Education classes in Kinloch and the other participating schools.

I began writing the reflection journal in January of year one, prior to the gathering of data and engaging with participants in their schools, and finished in January of year two, when the post-engagement and data collection was nearly completed. In all, I wrote ten journal entries (Sample Entry, Appendix H). In the early entries, prior to engagement with schools, I used the journal to track my thoughts on my growing understanding of student voice from the literature I was reading, as well as encounters I had with those involved in student voice research and initiatives in Ireland. The latter journal entries centred on some of my observations of the early and post-engagement phases of working with students in my classes. Within this journal, I also drew upon data which had been collected from students in the form of written reflections which served to allow me to reflect on what students were saying about their Physical Education experiences.

3.7.4 Student Written Reflections

Without students reflecting on their experiences, they can quickly be forgotten. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated; and it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively (Gibbs 1988). As part of the engagement phase, students were asked to complete several reflections at the end their classes. These were mainly written; however, some were e-mailed in the case of Ms. Brown. This served to provide teachers with critical feedback on how lessons had gone, what students enjoyed and what they wanted to see both them and the teacher improve upon next. In my case, I used the written reflections within my Teacher-Researcher journal to help me reflect on the classes using my own observations alongside students’ in the planning and in forming of my own thinking. These reflections were also used by Mr. Green and Ms. Brown to help guide them in their own reflections on how they engaged with their students and what their students had to say about their respective experiences in class which was intended to help them reflect on their overall experiences when participating in one-on-one interviews.
3.8 Procedures Implementing Study

This section outlines the following procedures that were implemented during the study to sequentially collect the data. These included continuous class consultation and negotiation, external consultation and post lesson appraisals.

3.8.1 Continuous Class Consultation and Negotiation (CCCN)

CCCN was a procedure adopted by Howley & Tannehill (2014) in which participants engage in regular dialogue and discussion to reflect on classroom experiences and negotiate and implement the Physical Education curriculum inside and outside of class. Before and after each lesson, pupils reflected on and discussed their reactions to the lessons through a variety of informal methods. This included verbal and written feedback. The purpose of this was to create increased dialogue between teachers and students outside of classes. This CCCN process continued throughout the study with students continuously being asked to reflect on their experiences, critique them and provide feedback as to what happened next. CCCN was something I used with my students on a class-to-class basis during the engagement period. It was also something Ms. Brown and Mr. Green were requested to adopt with their students throughout the study.

3.8.2 External Consultation

Although learners are the primary benefactors of a curriculum, it is crucial that we recognise that others can inform our decisions and provide us with a broader and perhaps clearer perspective of life in a given school, and the implications this can have for Physical Education (Lund and Tannehill, 2010). Prior to, during, and after the classroom engagement periods I, as the teacher-researcher, took it upon myself to seek out numerous individuals with experience of facilitating student voice initiatives both through research and small-scale in-school initiatives. By meeting academics and teachers who shared a similar disposition as myself as to how student voice could be created, I was able to carefully consider theirs and my experiences of adopting a similar approach to working with students in Irish post-primary schools, sharing congenial approaches of dialogue which could be used to elicit student voice. These consultations also served to guide me in my reflection journal entries.
3.8.3 Post Lesson Student Appraisals

Students in all three schools were asked to appraise their Physical Education classes on a regular basis. This came in the form of verbal and written feedback. Teachers then reflected on what students had said, using the information to inform their planning of classes, ensuring that students’ needs and interests were met as well as providing them with opportunities to elicit their voices and make decisions pertaining to content and instruction.

3.9 Implementation

The table below outlines when and how the data were collected during the study. This was done over three sequential phases: Pre-Engagement; Early Engagement; Post Engagement. These phases are further explained and outlined below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Instrument</th>
<th>Year 1 Phase One: Pre-Engagement May-Aug</th>
<th>Year 1 Phase Two: Early-Engagement Sep-Dec</th>
<th>Year 2 Phase Three: Post-Engagement Jan-Jun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group (FG) with Researcher and Teachers</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>FG with Researcher and Students</td>
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<td>FG with Teacher and Students</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Written Reflections</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.9.1 Phase One: Pre-Engagement

Phase One occurred in May Year 1 of the study, at the end of students’ second year in Irish post-primary school. At this point, I as the teacher researcher conducted three focus group interviews with my cohort of students alongside students in Woodville and Millbrook. I also conducted two one-on-one interviews with Ms. Brown and Mr. Green. The purpose of the pre-engagement phase was to establish how teachers, students and schools accommodated student voice in the design, delivery and assessment of Physical Education and other subjects within schools and if or how they wanted this to change. The data collected from this phase served to inform both me and the teachers of what students thought of Physical Education and what changes they would like to see which afford them a greater say ahead of the engagement period.

3.9.2 Phase Two: Early Engagement

Phase Two occurred in September and October of Year 1 of the study, when students were in their third year of Irish post-primary school. Having analysed students feedback from the pre-engagement phase, Ms. Brown, Mr. Green, and I set about facilitating student voice within our respective classes. Firstly, I shared the data with them, identifying what I saw to be key changes students wanted to see in their Physical Education classes as well as ways they had suggested that they could be better heard and involved with their teachers. During this time teachers and students then participated in Physical Education classes and reflected on their experiences with their teacher on the presentation and practices they observed. In doing so, the teachers and students began to re-imagine their Physical Education classes, working together and informing each other in decision making, presentation and practice. Ms. Brown, Mr. Green, and I, challenged ourselves to engage students in a more dialogic manner. To do so, at the end of this period in October, Ms. Brown, Mr. Green conducted the focus group interviews (Appendix C) themselves with their own students. The focus group data, gathered by Ms. Brown and Mr. Green during this time, were then transcribed by me and used for analysis. As well as this, we also participated in a focus group interview with a member of PESS faculty to help us discuss our own experiences and thoughts during that period.
3.9.3 Phase Three: Post Engagement

Phase Three occurred between January and June of Year 2 in the study. At this point, participants reflected on the engagement period and the changes which they observed to their Physical Education classes as a result of adopting a student voice approach. Once again, I conducted separate focus groups with the three student cohorts as well as one-on-one interviews with Ms. Brown and Mr. Green. Finally, I participated in a one-on-one interview with a PESS faculty member to reflect on my own experience of the study. At this point all the data were gathered for further analysis, identifying emergent themes and points for discussion based on the available literature and previous studies.

3.10 Data Analysis

Glesne (1999) states that “data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned” (p. 130). Data analysis of the results used the Miles and Huberman Framework (1994) which involves data reduction, data display and drawing and verifying conclusions based on the literature and data analysed. This framework was used for the focus group interviews, one-on-one interviews and teacher-researcher journal. Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, abstracting, and transforming the data that appears in written up field notes or transcripts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Data display involves displaying results in “an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 11). Drawing and verifying conclusions from displayed data and confirming their strength involves using a series of specific tactics such as “forming patterns, looking at contrasts, clarifying relationships, and building a coherent understanding (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 286).

Once gathered, the data were transcribed and checked using Microsoft Word and were inductively analysed and reviewed repeatedly looking for patterns, themes, and regularities and identifying regularities, paradoxes, nuances in meanings and constraints (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), and then coded. Coding refers to the identification of topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed through the participants’ narratives and interpreted by the researcher (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The process of coding breaks the data into parts so that the data are manageable, with the result of rebuilding the data to tell a storyline (Stuckey, 2015). This reviewing of data and codes then led to the theming of the data. Theming refers to the drawing together of codes from one or more transcripts to present the findings of
qualitative research in a coherent and meaningful way (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The data were then synthesised to present key findings for further consideration and discussion.

Triangulation was then used to “increase scope, depth and consistency in methodological proceedings” (Flick, 2005, p. 227.). I, the teacher researcher, and faculty supervisor viewed and read the coded data, discussing and analysing themes and patterns that were coherent and those which required further clarification and discussion.

3.11 Trustworthiness

Creswell (1998) describes eight verification procedures which can help researchers enhance and justify the trustworthiness of their work: prolonged engagement and persistent observation; triangulation; peer review and debriefing; negative case analysis; clarification of the researcher bias; member checking; rich thick description; and external audit. By continuously bearing these procedures in mind, I was able to keep myself aware of the challenges and limitations of what I was doing throughout the study as well recognising good research practice. Each one is further explained in the context of this study below.

3.11.1 Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation

The period of the study involving participants in their schools was intended to be initiated in April 2016 and completed by January 2017. Instead it was initiated in May 2016 and completed in February 2017. This was due to a number of considerations which were part and parcel of school life. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation are according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) “critical in attending to credibility” (p. 304). When a large amount of time is spent with your research participants, they less readily feign behaviour, or feel the need to do so, moreover, they are more likely to be frank and comprehensive about what they tell you (Glesne, 1999). It was decided that rather than wait until students were in their third year of post-primary school, it would be better to initiate the study at the end of their second year. This allowed for the researcher and teachers to consider what students had to say during the summer period and ensure that they were coming back to a new school year informed and aware of what it was their students wanted to see in their Physical Education classes to create conditions for student voice. This helped ensure that planning and practice leading into the classroom engagement period of the study was given due consideration.
Yet, defining how a study might evolve would run counter to the emergent character of PAR (Enright, 2010). The timeline of the study was constantly adapted based on how it was developing and in which direction it was going. Naturally enough, schools found themselves moving in different directions with student voice based on their own contexts. Furthermore, data collection took place at times which were most suitable for respective teachers and students. For instance, during the pre-engagement period, data were collected after school in Woodville and during school in Millbrook and Kinloch. Allowing for this flexibility ensured that participants were accommodated for and did not feel burdened by the process. By the time Post-Engagement arrived, data collection had to be staggered out from January to February due to the availability of participants. By this stage, teachers had been participants and involved in the study for over eight months. This time allowed for teachers and students to reflect on their experiences and the changes that occurred from pre-engagement to early engagement, all the way to post engagement. The time period ensured that teachers and students were able to make observations of how the study had progressed and what they had experienced.

3.11.2 Triangulation

Triangulation is a “word used to name the combination of different methods, study groups, local and temporal settings and different theoretical perspectives in dealing with a phenomenon” (Flick, 2005, p. 226) that can aid to “increase scope, depth and consistency in methodological proceedings” (p. 227.) To increase triangulation and gain authentic and purposeful data from all the participants in the study, a variety of systematic data collection methodologies were employed as already outlined in this chapter. Aiding focus groups, one-on-one interviews, the reflection journal and student written reflections were written appraisals which were encouraged throughout the study within classes and outside of them.

3.11.3 Peer Review

My research supervisor primarily served the role of my peer reviewer. She was responsible for ensuring that the research was ethical, appropriate and purposeful throughout. This was done in many forms. Firstly, she challenged me to develop a greater understanding of student voice, one which would lead me to a greater appreciation of theoretical frameworks and literature around the topic. She critically questioned my thinking on measurement procedures
and procedures implementing the study prior to using them. As well as this, she probed the type of questions and how I was asking them in focus groups and interviews, ensuring that the data being gathered were pertinent and allowed participants to speak accordingly. Further peer review took place in the two end of year progression review meetings with additional academic researchers from the University of Limerick who provided integral feedback and advice on how the study was progressing and what could be done to further validate it.

3.11.4 Negative Case Analysis
A consistent effort was made to search for and discuss elements of the data that did not support or appeared to contradict patterns or explanations that were emerging from data analysis. This was done through discussions with the supervisor and further elaboration on the data by participants involved. This would involve me asking participants to review what they had said, asking them whether they were satisfied with my interpretation of what they had said or if they wished to clarify what they were trying to say.

3.11.5 Researcher Bias
Prior to this study I, as both a teacher and a researcher, had a strong disposition towards the necessity of adopting a student voice approach within Irish post-primary schools. This had already led me to conduct a study which involved students in a meaningful and invested way. In ways, my perceptions and visions of student voice were framed prior to the study. In working with students, whether we are teachers, teacher-researchers, or researchers, we will inevitably find ourselves talking about them and, perhaps less frequently, on behalf of them or for them (Fielding, 2004). With the help of the literature, external consultation, and continued peer review with my supervisor, I consistently reviewed the way participants were encouraged to speak and work both with me and themselves. This meant that I interviewed students in Woodville and Millbrook rather than the teachers themselves at two other points in the study. To gather the thoughts of teachers appropriately, the supervisor conducted one focus group interview with the three teachers and a one-on-one interview with me. This helped remove any bias that could have been misconstrued in other interviews.
3.11.6 Member Checking
By the nature of the study, each participant was a co-enquirer, giving and responding to data collection throughout. This meant that the data they were creating also served to inform them and bring about changes within Physical Education classes. Often, voices of less outspoken students were missed. It took a while for some students to confidently engage in dialogic interaction. They needed to be afforded time and encouragement to speak out. When they did, it was important that what they were trying to say was not misinterpreted. Collected data were shared with students and teachers to allow them the opportunity to review and ascertain its authenticity. In this way I was able to present their thoughts and ideas in the way in which they meant it to be understood. This was done by all three teachers and their students during focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews.

3.11.7 Rich Thick Description
As an English teacher and a writing researcher, I believe the craft of documenting and presenting something which truly reflects its meaning is of critical importance. I consider strongly that “rich descriptions of the social world are valuable” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.12) and that without them, the true story is never fully told. In providing my narrative voice as the Teacher-Researcher along with the multitude of intricate and invaluable voices of the participants I expect to facilitate the reader in recognizing the rich and real world within which this study was lived. This is done through the direct use of the teachers and students’ voices in the findings and discussions chapters, providing direct access for the reader to the context and perspectives of the participants in the study.

3.11.8 External Audit
One of the procedures implementing the study was external consultation, where I sought out a variety of teachers and academic researchers with experience of facilitating student voice initiatives both through research and small-scale in-school initiatives. In doing so, I was able to share my methodologies and interpretations of data with people who had experience of doing so with other groups. They were able to inform me on what I was doing well and what I could do better. Before the end of the study, I was also able to share my initial findings orally at a formal presentation organised by the Teaching Council, opening my work to external appraisal.
3.12 Limitations

The findings in this study are specific to the participants and reflect their responses to the research process based on their respective contexts. Given the commitment to trustworthiness already outlined, it is intended that participants in this study were able to say what they wanted to say and that it genuinely reflected their experiences in the study. However, there is a danger that adult researchers’ and sponsors’ agendas can dominate this type of research, muting pupil voices and leading to a misinterpretation of information, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and lack of serious engagement by youth participants (Sandford & Duncombe, 2010). Indeed, efforts to “increase student voice and participation can actually reinforce a hierarchy of power and privilege among students and undermine attempted reforms” (Silva, 2001, p. 98). While it is hoped that the many voices which contributed to this work served to present a candid insight of what happened during this study, it would be amiss not to acknowledge the limitations these may also have brought with them.

Limitations to this study included a continued struggle on my part to acknowledge and avoid researcher bias, as well as bias on the part of the other participants to assist me which could have led to the possible concealing of unwanted truths and the construction of false ones. Power relations embedded within different social and cultural contexts can shape the type of talk taking place with the earnestness of the data gathered dependent on the quality and type of the relationship teachers and researchers have with their students (Biddulph, 2011). Furthermore, what students say and what we do will change over time - none of these are one-time things; they are ongoing (Cook-Sather, 2006). Examples of this would have been where I as the researcher, conducted a focus group interview with my own student cohort using convenience sampling, asking them to speak about their Physical Education experiences with me as their teacher. Similarly, Ms. Brown and Mr. Green conducted a focus group with their own cohort of students. Such an approach could have compromised what students had to say.

On top of this, my relationship with Ms. Brown and Mr. Green had manifested itself long before this study was conducted. It can be argued for or against that the honesty and willingness of us as participants in this study to speak openly to each other about how we taught and what we practiced and experienced in our classes was compromised by this pre-established connection. As much as removing oneself from the research in order to allow participants to express themselves wholly can be seen as constructive and necessary, it can also be argued that doing so can serve to undermine the work, calling into question the type
of ethical and trustworthy relationship the researcher and participants had developed in the first instance. Ultimately, this type of work is local, and it is and will be in each new space and place, with each new group of participants, that the complex nature and methodology of student voice and participatory-action-research will need to be decided (Enright, 2010). Creating spaces where teachers and students could sit, talk and listen to each other was at the heart of this research, grounded on Enright’s (2010) belief that Physical Education researchers and teachers have heart, and care deeply about student experiences and learning. In doing so we intended that our research contains and adheres to an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants and the researcher, as well as the institutions in which individuals work or live (Mertens, 2010). To not have done so, would not have served to reflect the spirit in which the study was conducted.

3.13 Conclusion

Those doing qualitative research in academic settings have never had more options or been more challenged (Clark & Sousa, 2017). The purpose of this chapter was to outline the qualitative methods through which I, as the researcher shaped the study, carefully considering the context and participants, the procedures, the processes of data collection and analysis, and the level trustworthiness exhibited throughout this. While the methodology presented is clear and sequential, the collection of data and procedures implemented were not always as exact as they appear. Incidents and obstacles which challenged the trustworthiness of the study were met at various times throughout. This meant that continuous verification of trustworthiness had to be implemented, ensuring that the study maintained its purpose and validity. The methodological approach and the subsequent analysis of the data collected helped shape the results and findings that are presented in the next chapter.
4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings of the study. It provides a breakdown of the research findings in a sequential manner based on the data gathered and analysed at the beginning, middle and end of the study. The data were gathered using focus group interviews, one-on-one interviews and a teacher-researcher journal. The results of the study are presented in three phases: Pre-Engagement; Early Engagement; and Post Engagement. Each phase reflects a particular time and helps to chart the changes in views and practice that occurred amongst participants as the study advanced.

Within each phase, findings are presented through the voices of the teacher followed by the students. Amongst these voices is that of my own – the Teacher-Researcher. My voice appears in the first-person point of view and, for the purpose of this chapter, reflects my world during the study as a teacher, as I worked with my cohort of students over the three engagement phases. Also, students’ written reflections were not analysed as part of the data analysis process, but instead served to provide sources for reflection for teachers and the researcher.

4.2 Phase One: Pre-Engagement Findings

The Pre-Engagement Period occurred at the end of the school year in May, when students were in Second Year. At this point, students had experienced almost two years of post-primary school and had been taught throughout by their Physical Education teachers (Ms. Brown in Woodville; Mr. Green in Millbrook; and me, the Teacher-Researcher in Kinloch). The findings in this phase present teachers’ visions of Physical Education, their approaches to planning, learning and assessment and, subsequently, the students’ visions and experiences of Physical Education prior to classroom engagement. It then presents findings on how teachers and students understood and experienced student voice within Physical Education and the wider school, and what they would like to see develop regarding student voice going into Third Year.
Teachers’ Experiences of Physical Education

The three teachers acknowledged that PE was perceived differently by their students in comparison to other subjects, particularly those assessed in the Junior Cycle. Ms. Brown felt the marked contrast was a positive as she wanted students to have a “complete break” from the normal classroom experience, where students could “have fun” in class without this being overshadowed by exams or assessment:

“I don’t concentrate as much on like ‘Did you get the skill right?’ But, more so, that you’re taking part; that you’re active; that you’re forgetting about books. [...] So, I do, in across the board from 1st year to leaving cert, try and make PE as fun as possible.” (Ms. Brown)

The notion that Physical Education was less stressful and not as difficult in comparison to other subjects was reaffirmed when I wrote in a journal entry that stress “was not something associated with Physical Education”. In my role as a teacher, I felt that students saw Physical Education as “an enjoyable and relaxing subject in comparison to the demands and stress involved in other subjects”.

Students’ Experiences of Physical Education

Students saw Physical Education as an opportunity to “keep active” (Anna, Woodville), the chance “to get people interested in new sports” (Conor, Kinloch). Students’ enjoyment in the subject came from being active and engaged in a variety of novel activities, and “not having to sit down and listen to the teacher all the time” (Tara, Millbrook).

Students’ unilateral frustrations with Physical Education focused on the lack of enjoyment in certain activities, the lack of group participation and, the methods of instructions and demonstration used by their teachers. Katie (Woodville) didn’t appreciate doing “something the same week after week after week”. In Millbrook, students identified regular repetition of games strands like “soccer and basketball” (Tara, Millbrook).

Additionally, the manner of instruction used by all three teachers in their classes was highlighted as frustrating by students:

“We spend more time doing warm ups than we do actually playing so it’s kind of annoying” (Mason, Millbrook)
“Sometimes, it tends to be like you’re doing a technique or something? And, you’d be doing it for, like, most of the class and you’re not really running around?” (Tara, Woodville)

In line with teachers’ perspectives, students identified Physical Education as unique and distinct from other subjects. Tara (Millbrook) felt it helped “destress” from “study and subjects” that were, primarily, classroom based. Maria (Woodville) affirmed this by stating that the “[Physical Education Teachers] try and make PE like, different, it’s not like school, but it is school, but it’s not like school work; it’s more free.” Nathan (Kinloch) stated that “you’d feel more relaxed” in Physical Education. This was due mainly to the lack of perceived difficulty in the subject, where you didn’t “have to do any writing all the time” (Jamie, Kinloch).

Teachers’ approach to Planning

Teachers identified that the main influence on how they planned for Physical Education centred around their respective Physical Education programme and yearly plans, particularly in Junior Cycle. Ms. Brown’s Woodville had an “overall plan” agreed upon by all Physical Education teachers, while Mr. Green alluded to following the “schemes of work” he and his peers had created in line with the JCPE curriculum. When it came to Senior Cycle, the level of planning was not as detailed. Ms. Brown viewed her planning in Senior Cycle to be less organised as “there’s always the few out or with no gear and stuff so you don’t have to plan for as big a class” and there wasn’t as much emphasis on the subject as there was in the Junior Cycle. Mr. Green noted that there was “scope there for more emphasis” to be placed on planning in Senior Cycle.

Teachers’ Approach to Learning

The three teachers took varied approaches to teaching and learning prior to the study. For Ms. Brown, instruction took on verbal and practical forms whereby she would “would start with the basic skills”. This would then develop as the lessons progressed where she could provide feedback to students and an opportunity to refine certain skills, where she would “try and point out what they’re doing right and wrong and then [...] let them practice it and put it into a game situation”. Mr. Green revealed a similar approach, although he felt that the learning in his classes was “very basic”. I, the Teacher-Researcher, admitted that although I
advocated a student voice approach to learning in my classes, I often found my approach to learning didactic and archaic. This caused me to continuously reconsider how I facilitated student learning in my classes:

“For me, the best experiences I have had is where the students are the main participants, they are learning and applying [the learning] for themselves. When they tell me ‘Let’s do this’ or ‘No, keep going, we’re enjoying this’.”

(Teacher-Researcher)

Students’ Experiences of Learning

For students, learning centred around performing and participating in sports and activities and, developing key social skills such as communication, cooperation and teamwork in the process. While students provided examples of psychomotor learning, such as being active and participating in different activities, they identified learning in Physical Education more with affective and cognitive aspects:

“Learning new sports that you didn’t think you’d ever even play before; learning how to play them and, being pretty good at them. (Conor, Kinloch)

How to get along with other people.” (Tara, Millbrook)

Teachers’ Approach to Assessment

Teachers acknowledged the need to improve and develop assessment practices. Ms. Brown revealed that most of her assessments were performance based, taking place at the beginning of the school year. Ms. Brown pointed out that such assessments occurred intermittently throughout the school year and were not consistently maintained or used frequently, leaving room to improve. Mr. Green explained that assessment occurred within strands and then, quarterly within the year with a small number of physical and reflective assessments for students. However, he questioned the importance of some assessments, identifying the need to improve, admitting that assessment in Physical Education had not been reviewed for a while:

“Those [assessment] sheets have been around now for a couple of years. Do you know, if you had another subject, you’d definitely be updating your tests and you’d be changing the methods of your assessment?” (Mr. Green)
Students’ Experiences of Assessment

Students in Woodville and Millbrook struggled to identify clear patterns of assessment within their Physical Education classes. Students revealed that any assessments that did occur were predominantly practical and based on physical performance. Tara, from Woodville provided an example of assessment “where [they] had to see how long [they] could run for and how many sit ups [they] could do and how flexible [they] were”. Similarly, Gary, in Millbrook, could only refer to the “beep test” as an example of assessment he completed in class.

Only in Kinloch did students acknowledge that written assessment was evident. However, students like Paul found that there was an imbalance towards written work over practical work which meant that “if someone really fit or someone good at physical activity participates in PE class he could have a bad day in the exam or just not be good academically” and his grade would not be reflective of their overall physical literacy.

Students in Kinloch felt that not enough consideration was given towards participation as “someone could be really sporty and be really good at something but they may just not be bothered and you’re trying even if you’re not as good as them” (Nathan, Kinloch).

Students acknowledged a lack of motivation on their part towards assessment as they did not see Physical Education as having any major bearing on their overall school performances. As a result, students like David in Millbrook felt assessment in Physical Education was “not as serious” as there were “no consequences afterwards” in comparison to other subjects. Katie (Woodville) revealed that “the whole class got the same” grades by the teacher, which undermined the assessment in her eyes.

Teachers’ Understanding of Student Voice

Teachers exhibited different understandings of student voice and its purpose in their classrooms. For Ms. Brown, student voice was an opportunity for students to have more control and influence over their learning in relation to selecting activities, critiquing lessons and determining suitable outcomes alongside the teacher. This would mean listening to what the students themselves wanted and how their learning and engagement could be improved, but within the teacher’s control:

“It’d be just so that the students would have a say in their learning and in their PE class? Both on what activities they do but also like on how it’s taught or how they’re expected to show.” (Ms. Brown)
As a teacher, I saw student voice as a means for providing my students with a platform to express their own thoughts and ideas as well as constructively critique their learning in classes. I understood this would mean students took more control than I did as the teacher:

“For me, student voice is about providing my students with the opportunity to have their say in my class; to express their own opinions and ideas; to use them towards a greater understanding of what is being learned; to engage them better; to make them feel that what they have to contribute is indeed worthwhile and relevant; to inform me and themselves better.”

(Teacher-Researcher)

Mr. Green’s interpretation of student voice focused more on student wellbeing. He also saw student voice as helping to inform him on what might be the best way to approach topics with students while also keeping his own learning objectives in mind, ensuring that a balance could be struck which was engaging and exciting to students:

“I think of it as a great opportunity for me to avoid first of all students that might be even stressed going into the PE class or worried about it. [...] And then second of all, that I might be actually doing what they want to do and which is still linking in with my kind of objectives.” (Mr. Green)

Presence of Student Voice in Physical Education

When it came to evaluating conditions for student voice in their respective Physical Education settings, teachers alluded to a examples which, by their own observations, were limited. Ms. Brown felt that her Physical Education classes allowed for students voices to be heard, where she would “give them a lot, like, kind of, leeway to do what they think and question me and stuff”, but only to a certain extent. She felt that the majority of students were “very vocal so they have no problems asking questions”. Ms. Brown also noted students who were not as vocal as others, the smaller voices in classes. She adapted her approach to allow these students the opportunity to communicate with her differently, where she would “usually spot them and go up to them one-on-one”. Ms. Brown also identified a group of resistant voices that disliked the subject, who didn’t communicate as much with the teacher within lessons - “the few that hate PE and don’t want to be there so they don’t pass much heed on what you’re saying.” She believed that her students were “very comfortable” in
communicating with her and were willing to question her on certain aspects in different topics.

Mr. Green provided a few basic examples of how students’ voices were heard in his classes. These reflection and debriefing instances, by his own admission, did not allow students the opportunity to elaborate on their thoughts and opinions and focused on students the teacher felt were best equipped to communicate appropriately to him:

“I would have to take what I think from it then rather than actually asking them specifics. It would be raise your hand with a number out of five on how good you thought the class was.” (Mr. Green)

I felt the relationship I had developed with the students in Physical Education allowed me at times to adopt a student voice approach in my classes, even if I didn’t always do so:

“Despite sometimes wavering in pedagogy, my relationships with pupils have always been strong, and this helps reaffirm that I’m doing something right; that as long as they can relate and speak and listen, that I can try do the same and they will know it.” (Teacher-Researcher)

While all three teachers felt that elements of student voice were evident in their classes, they also recognised the need to become more authentic listeners. Mr. Green felt it “would take a bit of effort” to listen to his students more carefully. He didn’t always get what students were saying to him and often, it could take him a period of time after a class to “actually figure out what they were trying to say” to him.

**Teachers’ Evaluations of Listening to Students in Post Primary School**

Teachers in Woodville and Millbrook believed that a conscious effort was made within their schools to listen to students. For Ms. Brown, she saw the work of the school’s Student Council as allowing students to relay their opinions to teachers and management. While students were at times overruled, she emphasised that their opinions did matter, and teachers sought these out:

“*The students do have a lot of say. Like, the student council; they’re always doing something. [...] Now, if they come up with things aren’t appropriate, obviously they’re overruled but the general kind of opinion of the students do matter.*” (Ms. Brown)
Mr. Green felt that there was a significant effort made in the school to listen to students’ views and voices. Staff had been encouraged to obtain students’ views in relation to classes and subjects. CPD had been provided to help staff better communicate with their students. Mr. Green felt that such an approach created the potential for staff and students to work together more collaboratively:

“I know that there are other projects similar to this going on around the school and we’ve been encouraged more to listen to students’ views in terms of how classes run and that kind of thing.” (Mr. Green)

In contrast, I observed a reluctance among school colleagues to engage with students. I felt that teachers and management were “uncertain about the idea of having pupils as informants towards school planning, teaching and learning”.

The three teachers felt students’ voices did matter and that there were instances in their schools where student voice was facilitated. Ms. Brown felt that Woodville was “not far off it” in terms of providing students with meaningful student voice. Mr. Green recognised the level to which teachers were encouraged to engage with students. For me as the Teacher-Researcher, although frustrated that student voice was not prevalent in Kinloch, I did feel that the school was gradually shifting towards a more collaborative approach between teachers and students.

**Students’ Perspectives of Student Voice Experiences in School**

Students identified that they had a little or no say in the planning of their Physical Education or, indeed, other classes prior to the study. The planning and decisions were made predominantly by the teachers. Breda, in Woodville, observed that the teacher “would usually say what [they’re] doing next in class”. In Millbrook, Mason provided an example of when they were told they would have the opportunity to have a say in the selection of classroom activities, but the teacher ultimately decided against this, and students “didn’t get to do what [they] wanted.” Similarly, in Kinloch, Sean admitted that students did not have a “huge amount” of say in the planning of any classes, let alone Physical Education classes. Instead, he felt they were “told what to do” by teachers, “just say your answer and sit back down”.

Students highlighted times where they were allowed to influence the planning of Physical Education classes under the guidance of the teacher. However, such incidents were rare occurrences and perceived as tokenistic and short lived. Breda (Woodville) provided an
example of being allowed to select activities, provided they were already on the programme and students would “have to do them all” anyway. Gary, in Millbrook, mentioned choosing a novel activity “on the last day where we get to pick to do dodgeball” as an example of having a say. Students felt their respective teachers compromised their voices and did not allow for them to be heard, with no opportunities for authentic listening. Anna’s (Woodville) comments were reflective of students across the three schools when she noted “there are rules you have to follow and you won’t really have to say anything because you just have to do it.” She felt their voices were not necessary or required.

**Teachers’ Expectations for Physical Education**

Teachers prioritised their students when asked about their forthcoming visions for Physical Education. Positive classroom experiences, enjoyment, increased responsibility and investment from the students emerged as key elements teachers hoped would be part of future classes.

Ms. Brown hoped that the project would create a spirit of inquiry within her students about their experiences. She hoped that through eliciting student voice in her classes, students would then be able to identify what learning approaches worked best for them across Physical Education and other subjects:

“You don’t actually think about things until you’re questioned on them. So, if they are questioned about a certain aspect of PE, that might make them start thinking about that.” (Ms. Brown)

Ms. Brown also expected students to help her improve the Physical Education programme across the school so that it could meet the changing demands and interests of the students:

“Well I’d hope that I’d get something back from what the students say. [...] I think it will change my teaching in a way. Not in a major way obviously, but just little things that they like or don’t like or that they’d prefer to do a certain way.” (Ms. Brown)

Mr. Green wanted his students to enjoy their experience of Physical Education; to be positive and constructive where they could “achieve a kind of happier, more self-directed, kind of more influential PE course”. Mr. Green also hoped that he could “get a good analysis of [his] own teaching and to try and improve in all areas” as well as finding different ways of communicating and engaging with students that could be beneficial to him in the future.
As the Teacher-Researcher, I hoped that the project would help guide me towards “a greater understanding and application of student voice” first and foremost as a teacher within the context of my Physical Education classes. My vision for Physical Education was one of a “process of exploration” and, as such, was not yet clear.

Students’ Expectations for Physical Education

Students’ future visions for Physical Education in their respective schools were varied. Breda (Woodville) hoped that all students could take on greater roles of responsibility, “more like equal to the leaders” of the class. Anna (Woodville) wanted a more collaborative student approach to classes so that “everyone could get an opportunity to lead and then get an opportunity to follow”. Jamie, in Kinloch, suggested that students could choose to take on different roles within classes with “everyone kind of organising the sports together [...] in a kind of group with [the teacher] included”. In Millbrook, Tara wanted to see greater participation with “less people standing off to the side and more people playing”.

Teachers’ Ideas for Creating Opportunities for Student Voice

Teachers commented on four strategies as potential opportunities to give their students a greater say in Physical Education: increased dialogue; a focus on students’ roles and responsibilities; a whole subject approach; and allowing opportunities for student voice to develop through trial and error.

Mr. Green sighted dialogue as a means to obtaining students’ voices. This could take the form of informal questioning, to questionnaires “similar to [interviewing] students and see what they think”. He also wanted to focus on improving class participation as it as it was “very easy to just not bring in your gear and avoid” participating in class. Mr. Green hoped that the other Physical Education teachers in Millbrook could get involved in the project in some form so that he could “share the benefits with them and share their views and opinions on it as well”. By working with his colleagues, he hoped to help them adopt the idea within some of their classes initially with a view to extending it further.

With respect to my school, I suggested an organic approach centring around what the students felt was necessary in their classes, facilitating it and then reviewing it before engaging again. Rather than assume what would help create conditions for student voice, I
wanted to focus primarily on what I heard from the students themselves and then act upon this:

“Students can reflect on the method they used in class and critique it. The student’s voice will have been used in selection, experience, and reflection of the method.”

(Teacher-Researcher)

Students’ Ideas to Create Opportunities for Student Voice

Students recommended increased dialogue between them and their teachers, opportunities to exercise democratic decision making over content while respecting their opinions and, in certain cases, providing anonymity in the process.

Students wanted to be heard more; to be listened to. They wanted their teacher to speak to them; to ask directly and listen to them about their opinions and experiences of classes as well as inform them on how classes would progress. Tara (Woodville) simply wanted the teacher to “just ask what we’re thinking”. Cian from Millbrook acknowledged that Mr. Green was approachable and the easiest thing to do was “say it to him”.

Students also recommended opportunities for more democratic decision making, and wished to have a greater input in selecting class content in Physical Education. Paul in Kinloch proposed allowing students to vote on the selection of strands available to students, where “everyone has a vote and you pick maybe four topics and everyone votes for one and whichever has the most you’d do”. Mason in Millbrook also backed the idea to “do a vote on what sports you do”. Breda (Woodville) reckoned it would be a “good idea to take a vote”.

To facilitate democratic decision making and dialogue, students advocated for some level of anonymity. Paul (Kinloch) felt an “anonymous vote” would be constructive as “sometimes people wouldn’t want to go up to a teacher and talk to them”. Tara (Woodville) believed that “people would be more honest” if everyone felt they could contribute their opinions without scrutiny. Conor from Kinloch also agreed that “it’d be much better if it’d be anonymous” as he didn’t want to “stand up and say” he did or didn’t like certain things about his classes.

Teachers’ Concerns at Pre-Engagement

The teachers expressed apprehension over how they would handle critical feedback from students, how they would make time to plan and facilitate student voice and just how
authentic this would then be. Ms. Brown admitted a fear, that she “wouldn’t find out that the girls hate” or “find cracks” in her ability as a teacher. Mr. Green conveyed a similar concern, noting that while he was “used to taking criticism on the chin”, he would be “disappointed” if students were critical of him.

As the Teacher-Researcher, I expressed “fear” about being “tokenistic” and lacking authenticity which would potentially undermine student voice. I didn’t want to “overload teachers and students” in so far as it would “impact on the rest of [their] timetable”. Despite acknowledging that the project would be something that “takes time, arduous and challenging”, I also recognised it would be “something worthwhile”.

**Students’ Reflections of Pre-Engagement**

Students responded positively to discussing ways in which student voice could be used in class. It was something that they did not have much experience of, and left them with a different view of their respective teachers. In Woodville, Anna felt that the experience made her feel that “teachers care about [my] opinions” and Sarah (Woodville) went further, noting teachers “want to actually make it better”. Mason (Millbrook) surmised that it was “good to be able to say what you want and, even possibly, get something done about it”. Students in Kinloch also found the focus group to be positive and constructive. Nathan noted it was nice to be able to speak out without being worried “that you’re going to be punished or be wrong”.

There was early scepticism of the project among students in Millbrook. Laura (Millbrook) expressed her concern about the authenticity of the project; that this may only be a flash in the pan and such efforts might quickly die out as the year progressed, whereby Mr. Green would “do it for like two weeks and then go back to doing it as normal”.

**4.3 Phase Two: Early-Engagement in Student Voice**

This phase of the study occurred at the beginning of the school year when students were in Third Year, and continued up to the end of the Autumn term. During this phase, teachers and students engaged with a student voice approach during their Physical Education classes. The findings in this phase present the observations of teachers and students on changes that occurred within Physical Education classes and the impact on learning and assessment. It also presents teacher and student observations on changes in the teacher-student relationship, the
role of the teacher, teacher and student perceptions of Physical Education, and the sustainability of a student voice approach.

4.3.1 Teachers’ Observations of Changes in Physical Education Lessons
Teachers identified changes in their approach to selecting program content, to their instruction, to student engagement levels, alongside changes to students’ levels of responsibility and leadership in the early engagement phase.

Selecting Content for Physical Education
Teachers made a conscious effort to include their students in selecting content for class. Ms. Brown noted she “rearranged the whole timetable for the year” to facilitate students’ request for increased variation of activities rather than focusing on one strand at a time. Mr. Green engaged his students to see what changes they would like to see in their classes, trying to “meet in the middle and marry the two together really”. As a teacher, I provided students with the opportunity to reflect on the Physical Education program and “make some kind of broad decisions” in relation to selecting class content.

Focus on Increased Participation based on Instruction and Task Alterations
Teachers set about increasing students’ activity time and decreasing time on verbal instruction based on the feedback students gave. Ms. Brown discovered that “they wanted less time of [her] talking and explaining and let them actually get on with it and put it into game practice”. I recognised a comparable critique from my students where “they didn’t want to want to listen to me as much”. Students proposed that the teacher try and increase students’ levels of participation within class while instructing. From listening to students, Mr. Green understood his students wanted to improve class participation. This resulted in him implementing a consistent policy where he reprimanded non-participation which was actively endorsed and encouraged and complied with by the students themselves, noting that participation “soared” as a consequence.
Increased Student Leadership & Responsibility

Teachers observed that students were becoming increasingly involved in leading and directing their classes, as well as asserting themselves in the planning process which gave them a heightened sense of leadership. Mr. Green felt that because students were involved more in their classes, it was “coming from the students what they want”. Similarly, Ms. Brown felt that because her students were leading, they were becoming more aware of the challenges such a role presented:

“They said it’s challenging but they like doing it.” (Ms. Brown)

Changes in Teacher-Student Control

Ms. Brown established a balance of control between her and her students, where some students were “the centre of attention” and had “the job of being in charge”, resulting in her “standing back and letting them take control”. However, Mr. Green and I identified balancing student and teacher control as a challenge. Both of us struggled with relinquishing control to the students. Mr. Green’s students “pushed the boundaries a small bit in trying to take [control] more” in class, which he wasn’t “happy to relinquish”. I encountered a similar issue when trying to change the content as I struggled to “assume control over the class because they had different ideas and different ways that they wanted to do it”.

4.3.2 Students’ Observations of Changes in Presentation and Practice

Students observed comparable changes in Physical Education classes during this phase of the study, including increased student involvement in selecting programme content, more decision making, improved levels of activity, less inactivity and verbal instruction, as well as increased participation.

Student Involvement in Selecting Content and Decision Making

Students recognised increased involvement in selecting content for Physical Education. They alluded to having greater influence in decision making processes involved in planning and delivering classes. This came in the form of selecting activities, allocating time for certain tasks and having opportunities to decide on certain activities:
“I do feel you asked us what we wanted to do more. And the voting in class, that sort of thing. […] Because a lot of stuff that [we] asked about last year we can see has been implemented into the classes now.” (Sean, Kinloch)

**Improved Levels of Student Participation and Engagement**

The increased focus on activities engaged students actively and promoted responsibility within classes, improving students’ enjoyment. For Aine in Woodville, it was a Zumba class where “there was just no kind of explaining to it, it was just to keep moving the whole time”. In Millbrook, Cian enjoyed activities where they were not “not just standing there” and when “more people participated” (Laura). Breda (Woodville) felt she was now “listening more and trying to learn more”. Nathan (Kinloch) believed that adopting a student voice approach had given classes a “novelty factor” that improved their participation compared to other subjects where students “wouldn’t get any say [in] what happens”.

Classroom tasks involving group work and cooperation amongst students provided enjoyment in classes for Woodville and Kinloch. Tara (Woodville) enjoyed Volleyball because “everyone had to work as a team to get together”. For Sean (Kinloch) it was “nice to have some responsibility for what you were doing and trying to put your team together and play properly”. Only students in Woodville acknowledged a difference in the level of autonomy and roles that they had encountered in comparison to pre-engagement. Such a change meant that students like Katie (Woodville) were “taking control more”.

**Successful Practices of Student Voice**

For students, the process of providing feedback and reflection inside and outside of class to teachers presented them with opportunities for student voice. Students like Paul (Kinloch), got “more of a say”. Students appreciated opportunities they were given to speak about their classes. Giving students in Millbrook “more say” according to Cian, meant that they were moving away from Mr. Green “telling [students] that’s what he wants to do”. Mason (Millbrook) noted that “whatever we said we didn’t get in trouble” when “there was something [they] didn’t like”.

For some students, writing down their thoughts was seen as a way to have their voices heard. Tasks such as “using a piece of paper to write after the end of class” helped Anna to lend her voice to the discussion in Woodville. Conor (Kinloch) also preferred the opportunity
to contribute in written form, as it helped gather “everybody’s opinion without screaming and shouting and putting up your hands”.

For Kinloch, the granting of anonymity allowed students to elicit their voice without having to consider how they did so. Nathan felt they could “just say” what they were thinking without having to worry. It also allowed for students such as Paul to be more honest in their feedback as “you wouldn’t criticise the teacher in front of the whole class”.

4.3.3 Impact of Changes in Presentation and Practice

Teachers and students identified numerous impacts that had occurred to changes in presentation and practice. While they noted that limited impacts had occurred in learning and assessment, they identified significant impacts on the role of the teacher and the teacher-student relationship.

Impact on Learning

Teachers felt that increased engagement with student voice had not impacted negatively on student learning relative to content which was being taught in Physical Education. Ms. Brown felt her students were “equally learning what they need to”. Mr. Green believed his students were “learning a bit more”, allowing them to come away with “a greater understanding”. I remarked that I didn’t know “if they are learning any more” than they had been previously in Physical Education.

Teachers did make observations about how different learning approaches had developed as a consequence of student voice such as a more flexible pace of learning and instruction. Mr. Green felt that after listening to students, his delivery of learning points had “become a lot more relaxed”. I also acknowledged increased flexibility in how I managed the pace of learning tasks where I started being “a bit more patient”, giving students “that extra bit of time”.

For students, the impact in learning centred on improvements in the topics they were participating in and their roles within these. Sean in Kinloch believed he and his peers “got to learn more about sports that [they] like”. In Woodville, where peers were leading the learning tasks at certain times, Katie felt that this allowed students to “learn more leadership skills”.
Impact on Assessment

Teachers admitted that adopting a student voice approach had no substantial impact on their assessment practices. While Ms. Brown felt that she “never really had a strong emphasis on assessment”, the fact that she had redesigned the class program to allow them to engage in different activities over the course of a term made it more difficult for her to assess students. I, as the Teacher-Researcher, felt that owing to the initial objective of creating conditions for student voice in Physical Education, I was not at a stage where assessment was a priority:

“I think I’ve been so submerged in making sure, no more than (Mr. Green), that they’re on side and that they’re informing me and that they know that what they’re saying, that their contribution is there, that I’ve not really mastered assessment or thought about well how does this get assessed?” (Teacher-Researcher)

Impact of Student Voice on The Role of the Teacher

Adopting a student voice approach in Physical Education meant that teachers saw a shift in their roles as a teacher inside and outside of class in observation, facilitation and planning; where students assumed greater leadership of classes at certain times. Teachers recognised the way they directed their classes had changed from one where tasks were teacher-led to where they had a greater role in observation and facilitation. Ms. Brown noted that students assumed more control leading the class, leaving her with “a lot less to do” in terms of directing the class and instructing. She found herself “really stepping back”, as the students “would take over”:

Mr. Green felt he had “less direct involvement in the class”, giving him time to conduct “a bit more observation”. For me, I realised through my students’ feedback that I was “talking less in class”, leading me to acknowledge that the way I directed my Physical Education classes had changed:

“Students are saying ‘No, you’re listening to us more.’ So that’s something that I probably didn’t think about as much; I didn’t know had my way as a teacher or my manner or approach has changed too much – but it has.” (Teacher-Researcher)

The changing roles of the teachers led to an increased focus on planning for classes. Mr. Green acknowledged that he was “much more informed in the planning process”. Ms. Brown also felt that she was required to work more “just kind of planning for the class” than she
would have previously. I reaffirmed their feelings, noting that the understanding of planning changed:

“Yeah, I mean I’m more conscious. I mean before, planning for classes, my idea of planning and preparing would have been setting up the drills and making sure that they could be delivered as quickly as possible in the class. Whereas now, I’m more conscious of planning from the point of view of “Is this what they want? Is this what they’ll be looking for?” (Teacher-Researcher)

**Teacher-Student Relationship**

Teachers recognised enhancements in their relationship with students through creating conditions for student voice. Teachers believed students were willing to approach them and express their views, knowing that the teacher was open to listening and respecting them:

“I do think that they like that I’m giving them respect more so. They like that I’m trusting them with this; and they see that.” (Ms. Brown)

“Certainly, I feel that they’re probably more willing to speak to me and that there’s an element of, not necessarily justice, but fairness there? They feel that they can actually make points to me about certain things and that, at the very least, I won’t dismiss them.” (Teacher-Researcher)

Students appeared to be developing a level of respect and empathy, where they began to see that “teachers were human” (Ms. Brown). By creating opportunities for student voice, teachers felt their students were seeing them in a different light:

“There’s almost a small level, not a lot now, but a small level of sympathy where they’re saying ‘Jesus, he’s really trying here’ [...] There’ll be a certain kind of fairness in speaking to me that they might not get in another class” (Teacher-Researcher)

**Impact on Teachers’ Perceptions of Physical Education**

Teachers identified that the study was helping them evolve their personal perceptions of Physical Education. Key to this change in perception was moving away from skill and drill
based performance they would have relied on previously to promote student engagement and enjoyment.

Teachers recognised the demand to increase students’ levels of activity as students wanted to be active in their classes. For Mr. Green, he identified that his students felt “the need to be entertained”, where PE was “fun time”, and this challenged him to marry their idea with what he wanted students “to learn and take from it”. Ms. Brown, having previously believed that students “should be moving more so than standing around watching”, was convinced her students wanted classes to be “as active as you can make it”. This was in contrast to her training, where she felt the emphasis was “to teach them the skills”. For me, I felt that the learning experience was unique in that it doesn’t “match up with everything that’s presented to students in school”.

Adopting and Sustaining a Student Voice Approach

While teachers felt that they were adopting a student voice approach to Physical Education, they all expressed uncertainty about the feasibility of the approach for others. For them, this depended on the level of control the teacher would be willing to relinquish and the length to which they would be willing to be critiqued by students.

Ms. Brown felt that there were teachers “that wouldn’t attempt to try” such an approach “because of their personality”; that teachers were “creatures of habit”, and it would be “hard to get them to change how they teach and how they approach” their subjects. Mr. Green believed that Physical Education teachers would “have to leave [their] ego at the door and put [their] thick skin on” when students were forwarding their thoughts and opinions.

When asked about sustainability, each teacher had different visions of how this would happen. Although it meant more “work and planning” (Mr. Green) and “it does take a lot of time” (Teacher-Researcher), teachers felt that the rewards of this approach were greater than the drawbacks. Ms. Brown noted this approach would allow for students to develop a greater understanding of their Physical Education experiences:

“Some of the things I have done with this class I’d like to introduce across the board.” (Ms. Brown)

Mr. Green and I wished to continue to extend opportunities for student voice to other classes while ensuring its impact on students would be the same:
“If it was this time next year, I would hope that I would have this spread out maybe to my three third year classes [...] But then, I’m not sure if the changes would be as dramatic with three classes as what could be just with one.”

(Teacher-Researcher)

Mr. Green and I had contrasting expectations of the support we would receive from school managements. Mr. Green acknowledged that there was “quite a lot of top-down student voice” emphasis placed on teachers in his school. While he would be encouraged to continue to adopt such an approach, I believed that acquiring backing in my school would be difficult. I feared that teachers and management would start “picking holes” and “really calling it into question”. Such apprehension made me feel confined in my approach going forward.

Students in all three schools favoured a continuation of opportunities for student voice. They believed that the approach used by their teachers could be sustained. Breda believed that adopting such an approach was “not that difficult” for Ms. Brown, and felt that “any teachers could do it”. Sean in Kinloch insisted that Physical Education classes “shouldn’t go back to the way it was because it’s better now”.

4.4 Phase Three: Post Engagement Findings

The third and final phase of the project occurred during January and February, the students’ Third Year. During this phase, teachers and students reflected on their experience of Physical Education classes during September to December. The findings present the observations of teachers and students on the overall changes that occurred within Physical Education classes and the impact this had on them. The three main findings address teacher-student relationships, and the role of the teacher; as well as teacher and student perceptions of Physical Education and the sustainability of a student voice approach for all. This section concludes noting the challenges and key learnings for teachers and how student voice might shape schooling in the future.

4.4.1 Teachers’ Observations of Students’ Responses to Student Voice

Overall, teachers noted a positive response from their students to their voices being heard. This led to students communicating with rather than to teachers. Ms. Brown noted that students were “excited and curious about what they were doing and what was happening next” in their classes. I believed that by allowing students “the opportunity to express
themselves and to speak about their experiences in the subject”, they were willing “to say things that they probably didn’t get to say” before. This led to students appreciating and respecting my efforts as a teacher:

“The students, in particular in the focus group interview, would have said ‘You made an effort and we appreciate that’ and ‘We know that you’re trying’. I didn’t really want anything more than they knew that I was making an effort to listen to them.” (Teacher-Researcher)

Teachers felt that students appreciated their efforts to adopt a student voice approach. Ms. Brown believed her students “absolutely loved it”, that by “actually giving them responsibility”, she saw the positive responses of students to her efforts. For Mr. Green, the “positive reaction that [he] got from the students” served to motivate him to further “maximise their enjoyment and learning from the subject”.

4.4.2 Teachers’ Observations of Changes in Physical Education

When asked about what changes teachers had made to their teaching of Physical Education over the course of the engagement period, teachers identified changes in how they selected and planned programme content, relinquished control to empower students to make decisions and, tracking student voice through written and verbal feedback.

Opportunities for Student Voice in Decision Making in Planning Physical Education Classes

Ms. Brown and I felt we made a conscious effort to allow students a say in the planning and selection of program content. Ms. Brown allowed her students to decide the order in which they completed topics. Her students decided “they wanted to do something different every week”, meaning “they got the same amount of each sport, but not just every week”. I, as the Teacher-Researcher, identified that “opportunities to make decisions would have been one of the big ones” in terms of changes in my practice. I felt I accomplished this while “also being able to make sure that I was finishing off the JCPE curriculum”.

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Relinquishing Teacher Control in Class and Responding to Resistance

A consequence of allowing students more say was that teachers had altered their practice to allow students more control and autonomy in classes. Ms. Brown gave “the students a lot more control of the class”, which meant that she “became less of a dominant feature in the classroom”. Mr. Green believed he had become more “comfortable with the whole idea of taking in [student] ideas and rolling with them”. I admitted that I “didn’t realise [...] how difficult it was” for me initially to relinquish control as I “held more control” than I had perceived beforehand. However, I acknowledged that doing so meant that students were helping me “to make the best decisions for [them]”.

Teachers acknowledged that because of their efforts to create conditions for student voice and listen to their students more, at times students responded with resistance. When teachers encountered resistance, this challenged them to assert a level of control they were comfortable with, while also reasoning and trying to find compromise. Mr. Green and I felt that we encountered considerable resistance from students at various times. This was challenging for us and meant that, at times, we struggled to deal effectively with such responses:

“It actually showed a resistance between the class and myself; that we were going in different directions. [...] I didn’t think it was going to work. I was starting to think then ‘Why didn’t I just leave it as normal?’” (Mr. Green)

While we acknowledged that dealing with resistant students was at times difficult, we continued to work towards compromise. For me, encountering student resistance only served to motivate me to continue creating opportunities for student voice:

“I was stubborn enough. I knew that it needed to be tied in a little bit. But then, that would have been contradicting a lot of what I believed in and what I wanted to happen. But, in fairness, the students noticed that then. They said ‘Well, you were still able to rope people in when it was needed to be done’”

(Teacher-Researcher)

Dialogue and Discussion, Written Reflection and Anonymity

Teachers agreed that the project had helped them extend opportunities for dialogue, discussion and written reflection. Ms. Brown stated she “gave [students] more of a chance from the beginning” to speak openly and discuss with her how they viewed classes and what
it was they thought about certain elements and activities. I, as a teacher, allowed more opportunities for dialogue and discussion “while in the lessons, before the start of class [and] during class”, regularly looking “to seek feedback from the students” so I could “actually look at what all the students were saying about the classes”. Mr. Green also felt that the practice of asking students to provide written feedback had helped him “get a kind of feel for what everybody actually thinks of the class”.

While initially students in Millbrook and Kinloch opted for anonymity, fewer students did so as they became more confident in expressing themselves:

> “Once I went through [written feedback] with the students, the second time putting their name to their comments, was sometimes even better; that they really wanted to show me what they thought of the class themselves.” (Mr. Green)

### 4.4.3 Teachers’ Observations of the Impact of Changes in Presentation and Practice

Teachers identified that changes in presentation and practice during the study had led to impacts in engagement and participation, student roles and responsibilities, and teacher planning.

#### Impact of Student Voice on Engagement and Participation

All three teachers believed student voice had a positive impact on student participation. As a teacher, I felt I “had students more on board” in class, especially when their voices had clearly been heard. Similarly, Ms. Brown observed that her students “took everything on board”. In Millbrook, Mr. Green noted that the levels of student participation had significantly improved from what they were before the study:

> “Participation hasn’t been an issue with the group throughout the year. They make sure to bring it in. […] From having the group last year, that wasn’t the case.” (Mr. Green)

#### Opportunities for Students to take lead Roles and Responsibility

While Mr. Green and I had provided students opportunities to support us in the planning and delivery of lessons, the extent to which we allowed students take on more responsibility...
within classes was limited. For me, students’ “levels of responsibility didn’t increase”, which mainly “came down to the fact I didn’t afford them opportunities”. Mr. Green had a similar view, acknowledging that allowing students greater levels of responsibility “would probably be the next step” for him in his practice.

In contrast, Ms. Brown provided students opportunities to not only support her planning and delivery, but also to take lead roles of responsibility themselves. She believed that having done so, students were “very positive” about her more challenging approach:

“I’ve noticed a very positive response to giving them more responsibility; to listening to them; to giving them more of a choice.” (Ms. Brown)

**Impact on Teacher Planning**

Adopting a student voice approach led to an increased focus in planning. Teachers found themselves planning for adaptations based on student feedback which in turn led to them reflecting on how they planned for all their Physical Education classes. Mr. Green acknowledged he spent more time planning to motivate students and meet their needs. He saw this as a positive development:

“It definitely involves a bit more planning. It’s kind of forced thought? I cannot turn up to the class anymore without properly planning the lesson out.” (Mr. Green)

Teachers identified greater flexibility in their planning to allow students’ voices to be facilitated. For me, using a student voice approach meant that revising and adapting my planning for lessons was something I was more willing to do. I began using students’ ideas to inform the process and lessons were more motivating and relevant for students:

“I appreciate now that one shoe size doesn’t fit all; that the students are good indicators of what’s best for them.” (Teacher-Researcher)

**4.4.4 Students’ Perceptions of their role in reshaping Physical Education**

Overall, students enjoyed participating in shaping their Physical Education lessons. For Laura in Millbrook, it felt “like you’re being heard”. Tara (Millbrook) believed that the process had shown teachers “care” and “they want to make a difference”. Tara (Woodville) admitted it
was “cool to have one subject where it is your voice being heard”. Nathan (Woodville) felt “it makes a difference because [students] have a proper say”.

Students in Kinloch and Woodville believed that their input had reshaped their classes constructively. Katie (Woodville) believed that students had “a big impact” in reshaping Physical Education as it was “completely different” to what they had experienced before the study began. In Kinloch, students like Sean recognised that “the class had a lot more input in what [they] were doing and [...] that worked.”

Notably, students in Millbrook did not feel that they had effectively reshaped Physical Education. David (Millbrook) acknowledged that while their voices were heard at times, it didn’t go far enough to reshape their experience based on the opinions they had shared at the outset of the study. For David, more needed to be done before students could feel that they were reshaping their classes:

“Yeah, it wasn’t really a lot. We said what we thought. But, like, some things were done. Like, not a lot, like warm ups, but some that we wanted didn’t really.” (David, Millbrook)

4.4.5 Students’ Observations of Changes in Presentation and Practice

Students observed continued changes in their Physical Education classes at the end of the study as a result of teachers creating opportunities for student voice, such as student involvement in selecting and planning programme content; continued focus on less inactivity and verbal instruction; and increased student engagement and participation.

Student Involvement in Selecting Content and Decision Making

Students continued to recognise increased involvement in selecting content for classes and their Physical Education program. They acknowledged input in planning and decision-making in the form of selecting activities. Paul (Kinloch) stated that students had “a lot more input” than before. Nathan acknowledged that the teacher-researcher “took on board” what the students were saying and made a conscious effort to adapt lessons to suit students. Mary believed that Mr. Green was giving students greater “selection” over class content.

Students in Woodville and Kinloch both identified opportunities which allowed them to make democratic decisions as another practice which successfully facilitated their voices. Anne noted that students were given opportunities “at the end of class” where Ms. Brown
would ask students what they “wanted to do [...] for the next couple of weeks.” Sean appreciated that the Teacher-Researcher allowed students to “vote on all” of the topics they engaged with in class, believing it “was better because you get the majority of the class’s preference”.

However, opportunities for democratic decision making were not openly observed by students in Millbrook. While Mary (Millbrook) acknowledged that students “were definitely able to pick [their] own” activities at the start, David (Millbrook) noted that it was “not a big selection”. Tara reminded peers that Mr. Green had informed them that they would “have to follow the course in some way” which perhaps limited the opportunities they had to make decisions.

Improvement in Engagement and Participation

At the end of the study, students observed that they were more active in class as a result of less time spent on verbal instructions and demonstrations. Katie (Woodville) noticed that students didn’t “have to stand there listening to demonstrations for long” compared to “what it used to be”. Sean in Kinloch echoed a similar change in his class experiences with “a noticeable difference between the lack of drills and the more game time”.

Students established that the overall level of class participation was better in comparison to pre-engagement as a consequence of being heard. Conor in Kinloch acknowledged that “a lot more people got involved [...] which was good”. In Millbrook, Tara recognised that “there was a lot more participation in class”. Students in both Kinloch and Millbrook credited this in part to the insistence of their teachers that all students should participate. Tara explained that participation had continued to improve “because [Mr. Green] actually tried stopping people from leaving their stuff and not going to PE” by introducing a sanction system for non-participation.

The notable shift in presentation of instruction in Kinloch and Woodville which facilitated increased focus on activity and participation, was seen as a positive feature of classes which improved students’ enjoyment. A sustained focus by the Teacher-Researcher and Ms. Brown on being active and participating in tasks was a source of enjoyment for students. Students in both schools alluded to really enjoying being more active. Ms. Brown’s task adaptations allowed students to lead as well as follow peers. A similar attempt in Kinloch, based on feedback from students, was praised by students. Nathan (Kinloch)
believed adaptations such as these came about as a result of taking students’ thoughts “on board all the time” and endeavouring to keep “changing and changing” to meet the demands of his students.

However, such a shift was not observed by students in Millbrook. While students in Millbrook acknowledged adaptations were made, much of the focus was on ensuring all students participated, rather than in adapting how they did so. While Tara noted that Mr. Green had “got more people to participate and stop them from leaving their stuff at home”, David took the view that there wasn’t “that much of a difference really” in how classes were presented and, that lessons were “just the same” as before.

**Dialogue and Written Reflection**

The process of providing feedback and reflection presented students with opportunities to shape their learning in class. From the students’ perspective, the ability of the teachers to continuously elicit student dialogue and discussion, along with written reflections that could be anonymous, was welcome. In the case of Kinloch and Woodville, students cited increased opportunities for democratic decision as a successful practice which allowed them to have their say on their Physical Education experiences.

Students in Kinloch and Woodville acknowledged that such opportunities to speak and listen to both each other and the teacher were successful practices. Nathan (Kinloch) believed that by openly providing “more feedback”, the teacher ensured that he “took on board” students’ ideas. The opportunity to discuss their thoughts with Ms. Brown made students like Mary (Woodville) “more confident in talking in front of a group of people”.

Students in Millbrook did not identify such opportunities in their classes. While David recognised that there were times where students “said what they thought” and “some things were done”, their voices didn’t bring about any notable change in his eyes.

The opportunity for written reflection emerged as a successful practice in giving voice to student ideas. In Kinloch, students strongly endorsed the approach of gathering written feedback. For Nathan it was “the easiest way to communicate”. while Conor believed the opportunity to write their thoughts down on paper “was just easier if someone was shy” as “they could just get their voice heard”. Cian (Millbrook) explained how students “had to write down what [they] liked about [PE classes] and what [they] didn’t like and what
they'd change about it.” However, the extent and consistency with which this occurred was called into question by the students.

### 4.4.6 Overall Observations of the Impact of Changes in Presentation and Practice

Once again, teachers and students failed to recognise any significant impact creating conditions for student voice had on learning and assessment. However, they did recognise significant impacts student voice had in class regarding teacher-student relationships, and teachers’ perceptions of the purpose of Physical Education.

#### Impact of Student Voice on Learning and Assessment

When asked if they felt student voice had impacted on learning within their Physical Education classes, teachers felt that cognitive and psychomotor learning outcomes had not been impacted. When it came to learning knowledge and skill in class, Ms. Brown felt that her students were “learning pretty much the same”. Mr. Green reaffirmed this from his observations, stating that students in Millbrook were “learning the same amount”. Significantly, teachers emphasised changes to students’ learning in terms of how they listened and communicated with each other and the teacher within the classes:

“They learned to communicate with me. And, they learned how to do that constructively and appropriately.” (Teacher-Researcher)

“I think they are gaining an awful lot more in teamwork, in cooperation, communication; that side of PE that sometimes is left behind.” (Ms. Brown)

Although Ms. Brown and Mr. Green noted that they had introduced more opportunities for peer assessment within classes, together with me, they did not believe that creating conditions for student voice had a major impact on our assessment of students in Physical Education. For Ms. Brown and Mr. Green, assessment was not a major factor. Ultimately, when asked yes or no to whether or not the focus on engaging student voice had impacted on assessment, Mr. Green admitted that, it “was probably closer to no”. I also noted assessment was “not a major facet of my Physical Education classes” during the study.

Similarly, students struggled to identify any significant impact on their cognitive and psychomotor learning. Students perceived learning in Physical Education as limited and not as significant in comparison to other subjects. Tara (Woodville) felt that “with PE, to a certain degree, you’re learning it and playing new sports and learning the rules and
“everything” but this was as far as it went. Cian (Millbrook) felt that he didn’t “learn a lot in PE”. Students did not see learning as a significant element of their classes. Students noted a lack of focus on learning and assessment in Physical Education in comparison to other subjects and this allowed them to enjoy the subject more. While learning occurred, it was different to what they were used to in other subjects in school:

“You don’t feel like you have to learn; like in PE you’d be learning teamwork and communication and that kind of thing. But, you don’t actually feel you’re actually learning?” (Katie, Woodville)

“You don’t feel anxious going to PE. You do when you do when you don’t have your homework done for maths or something?” (Laura, Millbrook)

**Impact of Student Voice on Teacher-Student Relationships**

Teachers felt that, by the end of the study, their approach to working with students had changed. Adopting a student voice approach had led them to listen more authentically to their students and consider their input, which in turn meant students were more willing to communicate their ideas. Teachers also felt a greater sense of empathy from their students through encouraging them to question and critique their Physical Education experiences, and students in turn respected the teachers for this.

Adopting a student voice approach meant that teachers and students communicated more openly. Ms. Brown felt that students could “say what they want”. Mr. Green felt that placing an emphasis on student voice in his classes allowed him to “gauge the psyche [of the] students” and, at times, place himself “in the students’ shoes”. This led him to be “more empathetic” and have a greater “sense of the class”. I noted a similar change in my relationships with students whereby I was able to “listen to [students] more” and understand their “sources of frustrations” which led to me reviewing how I worked with students in class:

“I’ve been able to step back and, I suppose, listen to them more. [...] Students, they have a good sense of fairness. And, a good sense of what’s right and what’s wrong.”

(Teacher Researcher)

Central to this change of approach to working with students was teachers working with rather than for students. As a teacher, I acknowledged that working with students meant that I had come to respect and acknowledge their views and vice versa:
“Not everything they say is pointless or irrelevant.” (Teacher-Researcher)

Similarly, by the end of the study students were able to identify a change in their relationships with their teachers. They noted an increase in student respect towards their teachers, as well as increased confidence in communicating and eliciting their thoughts to them. For students in Kinloch, the efforts made to allow their voices to be heard led to mutual respect and understanding, allowing students to openly communicate their ideas. For Sean (Kinloch), the fairness shown in classes meant that the relationship between students and the teacher was “more level” without having “to challenge [decisions] too much”. Nathan (Kinloch) felt that the relationship was “at the point where it still hasn’t crossed the line”, with the teacher recognised as the “figure of authority”. In Woodville, students appreciated the extent to which the relationship had developed where they were comfortable in communicating with Ms. Brown, appreciating the way she allowed students to “give [their] own opinion” (Kate, Woodville).

In Millbrook, while students did not identify significant changes in their relationship with their teacher, they still acknowledged an improvement in how they communicated with Mr. Green and had an appreciation for what he was trying to do in listening to them. Mary admitted it was “good that [Mr. Green] was listening to the students and their opinions” as it was “important that a teacher does that”.

Teachers’ Perceptions of the Purpose of Physical Education

Teachers detected a change in their views of the purpose of Physical Education, in so far as that they needed to focus more on the students’ needs and interests. Ms. Brown noted that the positive responses she had encountered changed the way she saw the subject, also stating that the project reaffirmed her own confidence as a teacher but also challenged her to see where she could improve and develop:

“I’ve noticed a very positive response to giving them more responsibility; to listening to them; to giving them more of a choice in their PE class. […] It made me look at what I’m doing already and pick out what works and what doesn’t work […] I wouldn’t change how I teach, but, I would add in things that I’ve learned from doing this project.” (Ms. Brown)

Mr. Green now felt he needed to adapt his Physical Education classes depending on the students he was working with and what they were telling him. Similarly, I admitted that my
view of the purpose of Physical Education had changed from one in which the planning, learning and assessment was pre-determined and non-negotiable towards one where the purpose of Physical Education wasn’t as clearly defined and, instead centred around the students:

“A lot of what I had done in the first two years with them in assessment, they didn’t appreciate, they didn’t have any value in it, and they haven’t retained the knowledge or information. [...] I’m more aware now, I suppose, than when I started that I can still accomplish things without using the same approach every time.” (Teacher-Researcher)

Teachers observed a shift in their view of facilitating opportunities for enjoyment. They saw the need to make their classes more enjoyable. This meant they saw enjoyment as serving a greater purpose in class than previously thought, and this encouraged them to try and balance opportunities for enjoyment with constructive learning and performance outcomes. Mr. Green felt that he needed “to find a way to maximise their enjoyment” in order to enhance learning. Ms. Brown felt that some teachers “take [Physical Education] too serious”. Instead, she felt that teachers should focus on creating more opportunities for enjoyment for students.

4.4.7 Sustainability of Student Voice

Teachers felt that creating conditions for student voice within post-primary Physical Education was sustainable. However, the extent to which it was sustainable differed within each of the teachers’ contexts and depended on the cohort of students involved, as how well teachers could manage time and expectations.

Ms. Brown felt that having experienced it and “practiced it in one class”, it would be very easy to “replicate”. However, she did note that she would have to be prepared for “different responses from every class”. I was more cautious of the sustainability of student voice. While I believed that “students had a vital part to play” in their own education, I also recognised “the amount of time that goes into it”. This meant possibly limiting the amount of opportunities students across the school:

“If it is going to be sustainable, it has to be manageable; and that means reducing the conditions or the amount of times you could do it throughout the
year. Or, the amount of opportunities you allow students to use their voice and express it.” (Teacher-Researcher)

Similarly, to their respective teachers, students in Kinloch and Woodville felt the approach could and would be sustained and would be better than their previous experiences of Physical Education. Not only did they want their teachers to continue the approach, they wanted to it to evolve further, increasing their involvement in the process:

“They’re fairly small changes. But, gradually overall the PE class is changing. And, when you add to it, it’s getting better bit by bit.” (Sean, Kinloch)

Students in Kinloch and Woodville acknowledged their teachers’ parts in sustaining student voice within their classes. They felt that the approach was as rewarding for the teacher as it was for them:

“Like, the fact that you’re asking us, it shows that you won’t just like change and go back to the other ways. Like, you want to change it for the better.” (Nathan, Kinloch)

While students in Millbrook wanted to see conditions for student voice continued and sustained in Physical Education classes, they hadn’t seen enough change to be convinced that would be the case:

“It’s a good start but I don’t think it’ll get anywhere. Like, we could be doing this for ages, but I don’t think anything will come out of it.” (David, Millbrook)

4.4.8 Challenges of Creating Student Voice for Teachers

Collective challenges teachers experienced included a greater allocation of time towards planning, speaking, listening and responding appropriately to what students had to say, and challenges to make Physical Education more worthwhile, enjoyable and relevant. The challenges were seen by them as positive developments. It challenged them to listen to their students authentically and improve Physical Education classes. For Mr. Green, the main challenge of student voice centred on “planning, preparation, and then accepting what the students think”, something he elaborated on with the following analogy:
“It’s like the in-laws were coming over and you had to cook, you know? You’d cook your best meal. But you’re under pressure as well. You’re kind of showing your best hand. But, your forced to do it like.” (Mr. Green)

For me, “the energy and the feeling” I got from delivering “worthwhile” lessons which had challenged me to plan appropriately was “compulsive”.

4.4.9 Key Learning for Teachers

Key learning for teachers was that our students wanted to be heard and have a say in their Physical Education experiences. This meant that we needed to listen to our students more and empower them. Central to this learning was the realisation that what students had to say should be respected and their opinions should be taken on board:

“I’ve learned that I have to listen to my students more, not all the time maybe, but I certainly have to listen to them more. And, that they can help me not only to help them but to help others or to help myself too; and learn a bit more about myself.” (Teacher-Researcher)

“Let them be responsible; let them take ownership of their PE class. [...] I think when you listen to them, when they’ve a good idea, they realise then ‘My good ideas are listened to’” (Ms. Brown)

Coalescing the teachers’ learning was a recognition to respect the differences among students. I learned, as did the other teachers, that students were as good an indicator of their needs as the teacher:

“When you get it right, it improves the relationship you have with that student. And, it improves the level of trust and honesty and communication. I appreciate that there are things that the student knows that I don’t know or I’m not familiar with. And, that they can assert themselves in that situation; they can help me.” (Teacher-Researcher)

4.4.10 Student Voice Beyond Physical Education

When asked how they would see student voice across the Irish post-primary curriculum, teachers felt more restricted within their own respective elective subjects. They noted less scope and flexibility to adapt and change content due to the greater emphasis on assessment
and external examinations. Ms. Brown believed that she would try to encourage students to take lead roles within her Irish language classes based on what she had observed in her Physical Education classes. While she acknowledged that student voice could be “promoted in every subject”, she considered it “easier in PE” given challenges with communication and managing the Irish curriculum:

“I think that it’s a lot harder. [...] I think [the curriculum] allows very little. The curriculum and the exam at the end of the year really inhibits [student voice].” (Ms. Brown)

Mr. Green, also an Irish teacher, similarly felt that while adopting a student voice approach would be “useful”, there was greater “scope for [student voice] in PE”:

“With Irish, you’re kind of teaching to an exam as well like. And, you’re under pressure to get that stuff across.” (Mr. Green)

In my English, I also believed there was “less scope” for me to adapt what I was doing with my classes “where I had a curriculum and I was getting that done no matter what”.

While all three teachers were positive about the impact student voice had on our students in Physical Education classes, we differed in the level of optimism and certainty over how student voice would be received and implemented across our respective schools. Ms. Brown shared what she was trying to do with her students with other teachers in her school. She felt that while other PE teachers seemed “interested and impressed”, she was uncertain as to whether or not they would be willing to “change” their approach to teaching to incorporate it. She believed that for other teachers to embrace student voice like she did, they would need to be willing to try different things and make mistakes as well as working collaboratively and receiving additional support and continued professional development:

“Communication amongst the teachers themselves; in that every teacher knows what other ones are doing, and what’s working. I think definitely inservices and stuff on how to do it. If I had a training on how to include student voice into Irish, I’d have a lot clearer approach on how to do it.” (Ms. Brown)

Similarly, Mr. Green felt that the other teachers “would be very open” to creating conditions for student voice as they “want to get the best for students”. He felt that additional support in the form of teacher collaboration, continued professional development, as well as a whole school approach supported by management would be needed to create authentic student voice experiences:
“I would have appreciated a method of running a focus group myself or, of effective questioning; just some sort of help in that regard.” (Mr. Green)

In contrast, I held a very cautious viewpoint about advocating a student voice approach within my school, even though I believed such an approach is “badly needed”. While “the majority of teachers” were aware of my efforts, I was concerned that many saw it as “a tokenistic approach” rather than “an approach that could really help with teaching and learning”. My school didn’t “have a culture of listening” and was reluctant to advocate for student voice:

“I still think there would be resistance from teachers. Everybody is different I suppose. And, you know, teachers have different personalities and approaches to the way they present themselves and the way they work with their students. [...] If you introduce [student voice] and you disseminate it and you tell people ‘You have to do this now’; they can misinterpret and just say ‘Right. Well we have to tick the boxes here’ and ‘We have to do this’. And, then maybe perhaps the authenticity of it is slightly lost.” (Teacher-Researcher)

4.5 Conclusion

The research findings suggest that prior to engagement, student voice did not exist beyond informal and tokenistic examples. In seeking to create conditions for student voice, teachers and students positively transformed their respective experiences of Physical Education. Creating and implementing a student voice approach led to a change in the practices of Physical Education for teachers and students with extended opportunities for students to influence the ways in which they experienced the subject. This led to increased engagement and a strengthening of teacher-student relationships. There were the challenges for teachers in relinquishing control to their students and maintaining an authentic and sustained approach to facilitating student voice, and all three teachers were uncertain as to how student voice could be implemented effectively beyond Physical Education across Post Primary schools. These findings are further discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter Five
Discussion

5.1 Introduction
This chapter discusses and analyses how teachers evaluated and created conditions for student voice in their post-primary Physical Education classes, based on the three questions that guided the study. It interprets, compares, and contrasts the data gathered in the context of what is already known from existing research literature with a view to contributing to the knowledge base. It explores each research question in a sequential manner based on the findings generated at the beginning, middle and end of the study.

Themes are discussed and presented through the three research questions. Research question one discusses themes which emerged during Pre-Engagement, centring on understandings of the role of student voice within schools and Physical Education as well as expectations as to what a potential student voice approach would look like, how it might be assessed and what challenges it might bring during and after the entire engagement period.

Research questions two and three explore themes which emerged during the early engagement phase of the study and continued up until post engagement at the end of the study to understand where the participants came from, where it is they were, and where they saw themselves going in relation to student voice. The themes which emerged from this include changes in practice to dialogue and decision making, roles and responsibilities and the manner of classroom engagement. Changes in practice impacted on teacher planning, student engagement and the teacher-student relationship with limited impact on learning and assessment. In their final reflections teachers and students advocated for further opportunities for student voice with a view to sustaining the approach not just within Physical Education, but across their schools.

The voice of the teachers and students are presented sequentially to compare and contrast their thoughts on each theme. Once again, my voice appears in the first-person point of view as I apply my knowledge and understanding as a researcher to my experience and reflections as a teacher during the study. Major conclusions are then drawn on teacher and student perceptions of student voice, and the challenges and opportunities of creating and adopting such an approach.
5.2 Research Question One: How did teachers and schools accommodate student voice in the design, delivery and assessment of their students in schools?

The main themes that emerged centred around conflicting views and understandings of the role of student voice and what it looked like; teachers and students’ shared expectations and concerns of what student voice would look like and involve; how it could be adopted within Physical Education; how it would be assessed; and how this might change Physical Education moving forward.

5.2.1 Role of Student Voice within Schools Prior to Engagement

Teachers exhibited a different understanding of how much they and their school leadership supported the notion of student voice, what student voice meant and how it looked in their schools prior to engaging in the study. While Ms. Brown and Mr. Green both felt that their schools made a conscious effort from the top down to listen to their students, their examples of how student voice was facilitated were very much framed within Fielding’s (2012) first phase of partnership, *students as data source*; where students’ thoughts and ideas were surveyed and utilised by teachers to make decisions on their behalf with little or no opportunities for students to exercise democratic fellowship. I, as the Teacher-Researcher, identified a lack of partnership with students in my school due to a lack of top down support required to ensure student voice practices were encouraged and developed (Flynn, 2014). While teachers acknowledged their schools were limited in facilitating student voice, barely incorporating let alone going beyond Pearce and Wood’s (2016) *dialogic phase* (i.e. it had as its goal the flattening of social relations and an escape from the oppressive forces inherent to a hierarchically organised social order, all the while also being oriented towards action). However, they did believe that their school leaders were moving towards this focus. Yet, the extent and time within which this was going to happen remained uncertain.

Contrastingly, students stated they had little or no say in the planning and implementation of activities within their schools. As identified by the teachers, meaningful opportunities for creating and developing student voice hardly ever went beyond Fielding’s (2012) first phase, *students as data source*. While students were able to call upon instances where they had been listened to and influenced teachers, similar to what Pearce and Wood’s (2016) *dialogic phase* would suggest, such instances were tokenistic, not sustained, and were not commonplace in classes. The hierarchal nature of these post primary schools prevented active participation of all students in decision-making processes as noted in the Irish student
voice literature (Shevlin & Rose, 2008). Consequently, students felt compromised in how their voices were heard and acted upon leading into the study and did not necessarily feel like “active citizens, with rights and responsibilities” (p. 12, NCCA Framework for Junior Cycle, 2015). Instead, students didn’t “really have a say in anything” (Anna, Woodville) or, in the oppressive words of Sean (Kinloch), students spoke when spoken to and sat “back down”.

5.2.2 Role of Student Voice within Physical Education

Teachers felt that while they made a conscious effort to listen to their students when planning and delivering their Physical Education classes, such efforts were limited and lacked consistency. Teachers acknowledged that although they adopted varied pedagogical approaches to student learning when planning and teaching classes, they very rarely sought student feedback on the effectiveness of these learning approaches. Instead, teachers tended to present generic tasks which were wholly teacher directed. Assessment was also predetermined around specific tasks and teacher led. As such, the Physical Education programs within each school had not evolved to “meet the ever-changing needs and interests of students” (p. 10, El-Sherif, 2014).

The lack of student influence in the planning and delivery of classes was also noted by students. While they could identify instances where they had been provided with opportunities to influence the planning and delivery of classes, these were few and far between as the teacher would “usually say what they’re doing next in class” according to Breda (Woodville). The students’ experiences reflected tokenistic activity and contrived involvements with decision-making (Fleming, 2015). While students were facilitated as a data source in line with Fielding’s (2012) Patterns of Partnership, it never went any further. Contrary to the view of Cothran (2010), students did not play any formal authentic role in curricular construction. Their main learning centred on performing and participating in sports and activities as designed and led by their respective teachers.

Students also felt that they had no say in how they were assessed, which led to a lack of motivation towards learning and assessment in Physical Education. This only added to their belief that Physical Education had no major bearing on their overall academic performance in school. Instead a lack of personal meaning similar to that found by Carlson (1995) was associated with the subject due to the lack of formative assessment. As a consequence, Physical Education was seen by students such as David in Millbrook as “not as serious”, with “no consequences afterwards”.
5.2.3 Expectations of engaging with Student Voice in Physical Education

To get student views heard and understood, forums for listening have to be created (Cook-Sather, 2006). Teachers acknowledged the need to implement innovative practices they hoped would facilitate increased dialogue, opportunities for students to take on greater roles and responsibilities, and accommodate student voice within Physical Education. As per Fielding’s (2012) first phase and Pearce and Wood’s (2017) dialogic phase, Mr. Green sought to use speak and listen to students’ ideas to “see what they think” about their Physical Education classes. Student perspectives on schooling help teachers to reflect on their own practices (McIntyre et al., 2005). Mr Green indicated he planned to use questionnaires to gather information from his students to inform his planning and decision making. He hoped that, as a result, both he and his colleagues could be better informed on how they could develop their Physical Education program to meet all their students’ needs. I wanted to develop more opportunities for teacher-student dialogue which would help deepen my knowledge and help inform the professional decisions I made with regards to my classes. This represents an indicator of Fielding’s (2012) second phase, whereby students would be active respondents in the planning and decision-making process alongside the teacher. Such an approach meant that I would be trying to be collective and inclusive in the decision-making process with a focus on “negotiation and participation” (Pearce & Wood, 2016, p.10). Teachers were not guilty of dreaming big early. Reflecting Busher’s (2012) view, we recognised the need to firstly see the school world through the eyes of the students in school and adapt our practices accordingly. Only then could we start to think about implementing major change in how we listened to our students and engage them as co-constructors of our Physical Education programmes.

Despite teachers’ hopes that student voice could be made possible, students clearly did not identify themselves as active respondents within their classes. Instead, their level of partnership with their respective teachers rarely extended beyond Fielding’s (2012) students as data source. They did not feel that their classes involved an authentic dialogic approach as suggested by Pearce and Wood (2016). However, as with teachers, students did want this to change; they wanted to see increased dialogue between themselves and the teacher in order to influence decisions and create meaningful dialogue which allowed them to speak on their own behalf; to experience valued spaces where they could speak, and where the researchers re-tuned their ears to hear them (Cook-Sather, 2002). Alongside increased and open dialogue, students expected to have more opportunities to exercise democratic decision making.
Echoing Enright and O Sullivan’s (2013) citations of “more student-centred democratic approaches to education” (2013, p.396), students suggested “to do a vote” (Mason, Millbrook) on what subject matter students engaged with and when. Listening to students’ voices acknowledges the rights of students to influence the shaping of their own learning (Fielding, 2004) and the processes of their school organisation as an example of democratising schooling (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Students expected to have greater input into selecting and reviewing the content they engaged with in Physical Education with a view to adapting it to suit their needs and interests. Such an approach would see students become co-enquirers, offering support to teachers as they set about planning and implementing their Physical Education programs.

Additionally, students wanted such opportunities to be organised so that instances of tokenism and limited democratic engagement in decision-making would not occur; unlike previous experiences such as Kate’s (Woodville) example where the teacher would ask students collectively if they liked an activity and they would respond “Yeah”. Finally, students advocated for varying degrees of anonymity and privacy, which meant they would not be subject to scrutiny or pressure from peers or the teacher when offering their opinions. Such opportunities to share their opinions ranged from inviting students to speak publicly or not, facilitating private disclosures, or providing anonymous contributions to students who might not “want to go up to a teacher and talk to them” (Paul, Kinloch).

5.2.4 Assessing the impact of Student Voice in Schools

When it came to assess the success of their efforts to adopt a student voice approach within their Physical Education classes during the engagement period, teachers believed the students’ responses would be the key indicators. Ms. Brown rightly anticipated that her students’ feedback and observations would be indicators of whether her attempts to facilitate student voice would be “successful or not”. Teachers recognised the need to be flexible when assessing the success of their efforts, but more so, that the students themselves would be central to this. This was echoing Enright and O Sullivan’s (2012) view that students be given more influence over the research process to bring researchers and teachers closer to critical engagement with participants’ lived experiences and helping them to shape their learning environment.
5.2.5 Expectations of Student Voice in Physical Education

Teachers hoped that by creating opportunities for student voice within Physical Education they could bring about positive classroom experiences, enjoyment, increased responsibility for, and investment in their own learning from students as well as better informing their own teaching on how best to engage all students. Although only at the early phase of Fielding’s (2012) patterns of partnership, Ms. Brown wanted her students to take lead roles with active support from her, something they could “feel ownership for”; reflecting a dialogic approach that was collective and inclusive and intergenerational. As outlined by Cothran (2010), by listening to what students had to say, giving them a more active role in decision making and supporting the teacher, and working with them to bring about change, teachers hoped to create a path “of mutual worth from which all students can benefit, and that allowed them to find meaning in the class” (Cothran, 2010, p.59).

The main concern for Ms. Brown and Mr. Green during this phase of the study was the possibility that students would be overly critical of them as teachers when given the opportunity to critique their learning experiences. A potentially negative aspect of student voice work is that it presents challenges for teachers that some may not be willing to face, particularly listening to things teachers don’t want to hear (Cook-Sather, 2006). Ms. Brown’s greatest concern was that the girls would express their dislike for her as a teacher and would start to “find cracks” in her ability and capacities as a teacher. Mr. Green also expressed identical concerns, admitting he would be “disappointed” if students were to negatively critique him.

As the Teacher-Researcher, I articulated concern over managing my time effectively to avoid being “tokenistic” as I facilitated and worked with my students in creating opportunities for their voices to be heard. I expressed concern that adopting a student voice approach was something which “takes time”, would be “arduous and challenging”, and could lead to “overload”; where both students and I would not be able to manage and implement student voice meaningfully.

On the other hand, students were more optimistic in how they expected Physical Education to change. Their expectations centred around having greater involvement in their learning experiences in Physical Education; roles which empowered them to actively direct positive change in their school lives and to assume leadership roles in the process (Flynn, 2014). The students hoped to become active respondents and co-enquirers. Breda (Woodville) wanted students to play a “more equal” to the teacher. Anna (Woodville)
wanted to see a more collaborative approach to classes where “everyone could get an opportunity to lead” similar to Fielding’s (2012) phase of students as knowledge creators. For students, creating conditions for student voice in Physical Education certainly had the potential to move towards being collective and inclusive and intergenerational engagement, with both teachers and students working side by side towards their intended outcomes.

5.3 Research Question Two: What changes did teachers make to practice in Physical Education over the course of the study to facilitate student voice and what impact did this have?

Research question two focuses on teachers and students’ observations of changes in practice in Physical Education to facilitate opportunities for student voice within their schools and Physical Education classes during the engagement period and the subsequent impact this had. Once again, teachers’ observations are presented firstly, followed by those of the students.

5.3.1 Changes in Practice to Facilitate Student Voice

The main themes that emerged from this centred around teachers changing practice to provide students with oral and written opportunities to express their views as well as involving students in selecting content and decision making. Changes in practice such as introducing opportunities for dialogue and written reflection, decision making, active engagement, and affording students roles and responsibilities in Physical Education classes positively impacted on engagement and teacher-student relationships, but also led to difficulties with teacher-student control and an increased focus on planning and preparation on behalf of the teachers.

5.3.2 Dialogue and Written Feedback

Teachers noted changes in how they planned and delivered Physical Education classes. In line with Fieding’s (2012) framework, they began to work in “new ways” (pg. 55, 2012), not only seeking out students as data sources, but also involved students as active respondents to help deepen their professional decision-making pertaining to selecting class content. Teachers made a conscious effort to include students’ voices in selecting the content for Physical Education classes based on information gathered from their students. The challenge for the teacher in the classroom was to develop strategies to allow the diversity of students’ voices to
be heard. By the end of the study, Ms. Brown, Mr. Green and I all agreed that the project had helped extend our opportunities for dialogue, discussion and written reflection by students. For Mr. Green and I, the practice of asking students to complete written reflections and feedback was valuable in helping elicit student voice and capture the thoughts and ideas of students. Many of the students demonstrated considerable insight in identifying supports and obstacles to their engagement in school (Flynn, 2014).

Similarly, students observed notable changes in the dialogic approach used by teachers inside and outside of classes; from how the teachers listened to them, to the roles students had in shaping their learning experiences in Physical Education. This came about through increased opportunities to move towards Fielding’s (2012) concept of students as active respondents and students as co-enquirers. As was the case with Sandford and Duncombe’s (2010) participants, spaces were created for students in Woodville, Millbrook and Kinloch to share opinions and give their views on their experiences of their physical activity programmes. Students were given “more of a say” (Paul, Kinloch) and appreciated being able to speak about their Physical Education classes. Central to this was an increase in dialogue between students and the teachers in all three schools. Students were engaged in dialogue which helped deepen professional decisions as teachers began taking action with student support.

Opportunities for written reflection and feedback helped create dialogue and discussion amongst teachers and students in schools. As not every student wanted to speak openly, simple written tasks like “using a piece of paper to write after the end of class” helped Anna to lend her voice to discussions in Woodville. Key to this practice in Kinloch was the granting of anonymity, which Paul felt allowed him to be more honest in his feedback and critiques without having to worry about the way in which he worded it, or being seen to inappropriately “criticise the teacher in front of the whole class”. While initially students in Millbrook and Kinloch opted for anonymity, both Mr. Green and I identified fewer students who opted for anonymity as the study progressed. This may largely have been due to us moving away from the old practices towards a more dialogic approach where students were gradually being acknowledged co-enquirers and felt comfortable in eliciting themselves to us.

Aural and written responses clearly afforded more possibilities for students with a wider repertoire of languages to express themselves (Burrows, 2010). The opportunity for written reflections, both manual and electronic, emerged as a successful practice in giving
students the opportunity to voice their ideas over the course of the engagement period. For students like Nathan (Kinloch), it was “the most effective” as it was “the easiest way to communicate”.

5.3.3 Student Involvement in Decision Making

The hierarchical nature of Irish schools tends to militate against the active participation of all children in decision-making processes (Shevlin and Rose, 2008). Teachers in the study clearly made a conscious effort to challenge this notion; to include their students in decision making and content selection for Physical Education. This resulted in teachers altering their Physical Education programmes based on the feedback they received from their students. By the end of the study, Ms. Brown and I felt we had made a conscious effort to allow students a say in the planning and selection of program content. This was less so for Mr. Green.

Students also recognised their increased involvement in decision making about issues of immediate relevance to their own lives, such as teaching, learning and school organisation, which helped to develop their sense of citizenship (Sebba and Robinson, 2011). Students in Woodville and Kinloch both identified opportunities which allowed them to make democratic decisions as a group which successfully facilitated student voice throughout the engagement period. Having recommended in pre-engagement that students should be given the opportunity to vote on certain activities and class content, Anne (Woodville) noted that students were given the opportunities “at the end of class” where Ms. Brown would ask students what they “wanted to do […] for the next couple of weeks.” Similarly, in Kinloch, Danielo believed that the opportunity to democratically make decisions amongst students allowed “people who don’t like much sport vote for a sport they want”.

5.3.4 Greater Engagement

Another change in practice to facilitate student voice came in the form of modifications to instructional tasks and instruction to increase students’ active engagement. Students observed that classes were presented in a manner which required them to be more active, with less time spent on verbal instruction and their passivity as learners. Teachers set about creating learning experiences for young people that led them to become intrinsically motivated to be more physically active (Hastie, Rudisill & Wadsworth, 2013). A sustained effort by the Teacher-Researcher and Ms. Brown on students being active in class and participating in
tasks became a source of enjoyment for students in Woodville and Kinloch’s Physical Education classes. Nathan (Kinloch) believed adaptations such as these came about as a result of taking students’ thoughts “on board all the time” and endeavouring to keep “changing and changing” to meet the demands of his students. This allowed for a gradual shift in roles to occur in Woodville where students were afforded opportunities to take on greater responsibility within their classes. Even in Millbrook, where a shift in roles was not as apparent, students reported an increase in their levels of physical activity.

5.3.5 Student Roles and Responsibilities

During the engagement period, Ms. Brown observed a gradual shift in the roles and responsibilities she was entrusting her students with in her practice. More so than Mr. Green and I, she quickly reached a point in her practice where she was facilitating students as knowledge creators, whereby they were taking on lead roles in classes with her support and were “the centre of attention” and had “the job of being in charge”. Ms. Brown had provided students in Woodville with opportunities to not only support the teacher in her planning and delivery, but also to take lead roles of responsibility themselves. As with Flynn’s study (2014), respecting and acknowledging that students may know better how to help us as teachers to help them, Ms. Brown tried to do the same, promoting a sense of responsibility among her students.

While Mr. Green and I had provided our students opportunities to support us in the planning and delivery of Physical Education classes, the extent to which our students took on more responsibility within classes remained limited. For me, students’ “levels of responsibility didn’t increase” in Kinloch’s Physical Education classes as the study progressed, which mainly “came down to the fact I didn’t afford them opportunities” to do so prior to and during the engagement period. This highlighted a reluctance on our part to encourage students towards Fielding’s (2012) phase of students as knowledge creators. Mr. Green and I appeared unwilling to part with control to allow our students to do so. Such reluctance compromised the collective and inclusive and intergenerational interaction required by teachers and students under Pearce and Wood’s (2016) framework.

Students in Millbrook and Kinloch could only note minor improvements in their levels of responsibility in Physical Education. Students appreciated the opportunities to be autonomous and exercise their own volition. They acknowledged the importance of the teacher in facilitating student learning and students’ decision making (McMahon, 2007).
However, in the eyes of the students, such roles were limited with the teacher continuing to take the lead role. Meanwhile, in Woodville, students acknowledged changes in practice which allowed them to take on greater roles and responsibilities. Students recognised that Ms. Brown had provided them with active support to take on these roles as knowledge creators, where students were “taking control” and learning “leadership skills” according to Katie. In line with Flynn’s (2014) vision of “authentic listening”, Ms. Brown had empowered “students to actively direct positive change in their school lives and to assume leadership roles in the process” (pg. 170, Flynn, 2014).

5.4 Impact of Changes in Practice to Facilitate Student Voice

For teachers, the impact of changes in their practices to facilitate student voice included an increased focus on instruction and planning and challenges to teacher control. Notably, teachers and students could not identify any significant impact adopting a student voice approach had for learning and assessment in Physical Education. However, they did recognise an improvement in their engagement in the subject and in their relationships with their teachers as a consequence of efforts to facilitate student voice.

5.4.1 Impact of Student Voice on Instruction and Planning

During the engagement period teachers observed a shift in the manner through which they instructed and planned. Teachers moved away from traditionally leading tasks to a greater role in observation and facilitation of student learning. This was especially the case for Ms. Brown, who found herself “really stepping back” as her students assumed greater leadership roles. While not as significant, Mr. Green and I were able to identify a change in our roles, where we were gradually becoming less directive in instruction within our classes.

Changing from traditional roles meant we had to redefine how we planned for Physical Education classes with our students. As our role as teachers evolved within the classes during the study, we adjusted our approaches to planning for Physical Education, adapting it to meet the needs of our respective classes. Encouraging students to speak out about matters that concern them in school, whether in corridors or classrooms, helps teachers to see the school world through the eyes of the main actors in school and adapt their practices accordingly (Busher, 2012). I found himself planning differently for my classes from before to where I was now “more conscious” that “one shoe size doesn’t fit all”. Scholars and
teachers who hope to focus on student voice need to be prepared to spend a great deal of time working with young people if they hope to see below the obvious surface (Oliver, 2010). Creating conditions for student voice is not something which can be done instantly; it takes time and persistence from all of those involved to go beyond any previous level of dialogue and interactions, towards what Fielding (1999) describes as ‘radical collegiality’. While adopting a student approach to Physical Education was time consuming from a planning perspective, it was nevertheless rewarding for teachers.

5.4.2 Impact of Student Voice on Learning

Gibbons (2006) has noted that the involvement of young people in research should lead to empowerment and enhance learning capacity, but that is not always the case. In the eyes of the teachers, adopting a student voice approach did not impact significantly on learning in Physical Education. Ms. Brown felt that her students were “equally learning what they need to” while Mr. Green believed students were learning “a bit more”. At the end of the study, when asked if they felt student voice had impacted on learning within their Physical Education classes, teachers felt that learning pertaining to cognitive and psychomotor outcomes within the subject had not been impacted.

However, teachers did observe improvements in affective learning as students demonstrated positive dispositions towards themselves, the teacher, and the subject. The quality of relations between teachers and students is highly predictive of engagement in learning, school completion and educational performance (Smyth et al., 2011). While teachers didn’t feel that students’ learning had changed dramatically in relation to knowledge and performance, there was a significant change in their affective behaviours within classes and when talking to the teacher. Where students experienced learning on the premise of being autonomy supportive, their level of engagement and openness to learning improved (Hastie et. al., 2013). In the eyes of the teachers, the shift towards an autonomy supported climate afforded students the opportunity to open themselves more to experience learning, albeit not skill and knowledge related.

For students, the impact student voice had on their learning was also limited. When asked after the engagement period how increased efforts to hear their voices had impacted on their learning in Physical Education, students struggled to identify any significant impact on their learning compared to pre-engagement. Students perceived learning in Physical Education as limited and not as significant in comparison to other subjects in school. Their
views reflect those of Smyth et al. (2011), where examination based subjects, of which Physical Education was not one, held greater preference for students given the perceived emphasis placed on their importance. This, in turn, influenced their identification of the kind of learning they perceived as important. Indeed, students did not see learning as a significant element of their PE classes, either before or during the engagement period. Students’ view of the impact of student voice on their learning echoed those of my own, as I questioned at the end of the study whether or not students associated learning with Physical Education at all, let alone “if they were learning any more” than they had previously.

5.4.3 Impact of Student Voice on Assessment

Similar to learning, when asked the impact student voice had on assessment, teachers confessed that no substantial impact on assessment had occurred in their classes. Being more ‘off centre-stage’, and taking a reduced role in directing student activity and decision making, the teacher is afforded the opportunity to spend more time in individual assessment (Hastie et al., 2013). Ms. Brown felt that allowing students the increased opportunities to lead demonstration and instruction in learning tasks allowed students to learn from their peers while also giving her the opportunity to observe and assess students individually while this was happening.

Ultimately, when asked yes or no to whether or not the engagement period had impacted on assessment, Mr. Green admitted that for him, it “was probably closer to no”. I also acknowledged that assessment was “not a major facet of [my] Physical Education classes” during the engagement period. Our lack of emphasis reflects the current ambiguities surrounding assessment in post-primary Physical Education; where little substantial debate, research or change in policy regarding assessment in Irish Physical Education has taken place up until recently (MacPhail & Murphy, 2017). Although this is beginning to change, such change in how assessment occurs and is implemented was yet to be seen in the practice of the teachers in this study. In essence, adopting a student voice approach in Physical Education had little or no impact on assessment as assessment itself was not heavily pursued in the first place.
5.4.4 Impact on Student Engagement

Engagement is considered to represent the behavioural pathway by which students’ motivational processes contribute to their subsequent learning and development (Hastie et al, 2013). Meaningful engagement of youth voice can have a role to play in tackling disaffection and disengagement within schools (Sandford & Duncombe, 2010). This was certainly the case in this study. With this in mind, student voice continued to have a positive impact on student engagement throughout the study. I felt I “had students more on board” in class after creating conditions for student voice. By allowing students some say in how the lesson content was delivered, the experience was more relevant to the class, helping ensure that resistance to participation and engagement was minimal (Howley & Tannehill, 2014). In Millbrook, Mr. Green noted from listening to his students that the levels of student participation had improved from what they were before the study which, for him, was the greatest impact student voice had on his Physical Education classes.

Given its importance, positive student engagement became a negotiation point for students and teachers (Cothran, 2010). A focus on students being active in class and participating in tasks resulted in increased enjoyment of lessons. Students “listened more” and “actually participated” according to Tara (Woodville). In Millbrook, students were “trying to do something in the class” (Ciara) and “more people participated” (Laura). As with Flynn (2014) the opportunity to talk and encounter an “authentic response” positively impacted on their levels of enthusiasm for and engagement in Physical Education.

5.4.5 Impact on Teacher-Student Relationship

Recognising students as active agents, researchers, and curriculum makers necessitates the construction of an entirely different set of relationships to the ones that currently characterise how many teachers and students do physical education, and indeed education generally (Enright & O Sullivan, 2010). Changes in practice meant that in facilitating student voice, students were more willing to approach teachers and express their views and ideas, knowing that the teacher was open to listening to them. As a consequence, teacher-student relationships became more respectful and empathetic in the eyes of the teachers. Mr. Green felt he had “strengthened” his relationship with students as he was now “trusting them” and “giving them respect”. Teachers felt that students came to recognise that their teachers were trying to listen to them. If the teachers and students are to be perceived by each other as real agents of change in Physical Education, they need to adapt and re-imagine their relationship.
in order for a shift in roles and constructive negotiation to occur (Howley & Tannehill, 2014). Continuing to adopt a student voice approach meant that the teacher-student relationship experienced in schools continued to move towards a relationship embodied by mutual respect and collaboration.

Developing relationships that lead to meaningful and relevant educational opportunities takes time (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2013). As the study progressed, so too did the relationship each teacher had with their students. At the end of the study, Mr. Green felt his students were “an awful lot happier to speak” to him about their classes than before. These changes meant that teachers were working with students rather than for students. I had come to appreciate that students’ views and decisions needed to be respected and acknowledged as much as my own; that by allowing students the opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions, genuinely listening to them, and responding, they were “able to respect and acknowledge” my efforts in return.

By the end of the engagement period, students could identify a change in the relationships they had with their respective teachers. This came in different forms and levels in each school.

In line with Busher’s (2012) observations, students liked those teachers who acknowledged their agency and constructed respectful relationships with them as well as making learning exciting. For students in Kinloch, the efforts made by the teacher to create conditions in class, to allow their voices to be heard, were seen as fair and led to mutual respect and understanding and allowed students to openly communicate their thoughts and ideas with the teacher-researcher. Nathan (Kinloch) felt that the relationship was “at the point where it still hasn’t crossed the line” with the teacher still being recognised as the “figure of authority”. In Woodville, Katie (Woodville) believed that students were “all more comfortable with [Ms. Brown] because [they] know that she won’t judge them”. As was the case with Howley and Tannehill’s (2014) study, by evoking student voice in a constructive and collaborative manner, students were able to use their voices competently and constructively towards improving their experiences and relationships with each other and the teacher.

In Millbrook, while students did not identify significant changes in the relationship as in Kinloch or Woodville, they still acknowledged a change and improvement in the teacher student-relationship and how they communicated with Mr. Green and an appreciation for what he was trying to do in creating conditions for student voice. Although changes to
practice to facilitate student voice had not gone as far as students in Millbrook had hoped, they still acknowledged and appreciated the efforts made by the teacher, which had provided them with opportunities to bring about change.

5.4.6 Impact of Students Challenging Teacher Control

Allowing students more say meant that teachers’ control was regularly challenged. Teachers confessed struggling with relinquishing control in order to elicit their respective students’ perspectives and maintain their engagement. There were times as Mr. Green described that “students pushed the boundaries a small bit”; when he, as the teacher, wasn’t “happy to relinquish” control. Likewise, the practice of relinquishing control caused problems for me as a teacher as my students had “different ideas and different ways that they wanted to do” things which conflicted with my idea of what was appropriate. Consulting pupils about teaching and learning is risky and difficult to manage: it has the capacity for destabilizing habitual ways of behaving and familiar patterns of expectation about power issues in teacher-pupil relationships’ (Rudduck and McIntyre 2007). It is within this intricate hotbed where conflict will inevitably occur; the challenge for teachers and students is finding ways of ensuring this is overcome in a fair and constructive manner.

Teachers acknowledged that at times during efforts to create conditions for student voice students responded with resistance. When we encountered resistance, this challenged us to assert a level of control we were comfortable with, while also reasoning with students to find a compromise. While Mr. Green and I acknowledged that dealing with resistant students was at times difficult, we continued to work with students towards reaching compromise. Deviating from tradition and negotiating with students requires courage on the part of the teacher (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2010). Despite continuously struggling with relinquishing control and responsibility, the perseverance of teachers to continue to try and access students’ voices meant that we continued to afford students greater control and responsibility, even if it was not what the students had hoped or expected at certain times.

It is well documented that conducting research with young people in ways that generate authentic youth voices is fraught with challenges (Sandford et al, 2010). How the principles and dynamics of rights and respect play out in practice varies greatly across contexts and circumstances (Cook-Sather, 2006). While changes to practice were evident throughout the schools, the extent to which change occurred and the impact these changes had didn’t always meet the expectations of the students who wanted more control in planning.
and decision making. This was particularly the case in Millbrook. While spaces were created for young people to share opinions and give their views on their physical activity programmes and effect change, the extent and consistency with which this occurred was called into question by students. Similar to Fleming’s (2015) observations, what the teacher saw as genuine changes in practice to facilitate student voice were at times perceived through the students’ eyes as tokenistic activity and contrived involvements with decision-making. While Mary (Millbrook) acknowledged that students “were definitely able to pick [their] own” activities at the start, David (Millbrook) noted that it was “not a big selection”. For students, their partnership with Mr. Green rarely went beyond students as a data source, with the teacher in control.

5.5 Research Question Three: How does student voice challenge the way Post-Primary teachers and students view Physical Education and other subjects, and what consequences does this have?

Research question three focuses on teachers and students’ reflections at the end of the study on their experience of adopting a student voice approach in Physical Education, how this challenged their view of Physical Education, and what Physical Education and other post-primary subjects might look like with student voice. Key themes which emerged from the data were the positive responses of teachers and students to the study, with a willingness to sustain the approach not just within Physical Education, but across their schools. However, this was also met with a hesitancy from teachers to commit to a student voice approach in their additional subjects and with all their students. Similarly, students were uncertain as to how student voice would be sustained and implemented across subjects and in their schools beyond the study.

5.5.1 Reflections on the Study

Flynn’s (2014) study noted that a student voice approach to supporting young people is fundamental to the development of an inclusive learning environment for the benefit of all students. This notion was echoed in the reflections of the teachers, who were positive in their reflections on the effect student voice had on them and their students in Physical Education. By listening to students and encouraging them to speak, Ms. Brown noted that students were “excited and curious about what they were doing and what was happening next” in their
classes. Teachers felt that students appreciated their efforts to adopt a student voice approach. Indeed, their experience suggests that other teachers should be encouraged to do the same.

Teachers recognised that students wanted to be heard and have a say in their Physical Education experiences. Following on from Enright & O’ Sullivan’s work (2010), by appreciating students’ knowledge and capacity to imagine more engaging and meaningful Physical Education and physical activity experiences, and to create the changes they wished to see in their worlds, teachers found themselves persuaded towards authorising student voice in Physical Education. Central to this was the realisation that what students had to say and contribute should be respected and their ideas and opinions should not be disregarded, but taken on board by the teacher. Coalescing the teachers learning was a recognition that they needed to respect the difference of each group of students and, within each group, every individual also. The students’ differing viewpoints highlights the need for teachers in Irish post-primary schools to be open to embrace students’ ideas and be prepared to act accordingly rather than uniformly.

In line with the positive reflections of the teachers, students also enjoyed participating in the study. Key to this enjoyment was the opportunity to speak out and be heard, regardless of the extent to which it had occurred and was meaningful. Students’ acknowledgment of being heard in a more authentic and purposeful manner than before affirms “students should be treated with respect by teachers and that their opinions should be valued” (Gorard and Huat, 2011, p. 688).

It is clear that the process of actually hearing pupils’ voices, and acting upon them, is far from straightforward (Sandford and Duncombe, 2010). Notably, students in Woodville and Millbrook expressed their preference in speaking to me, the researcher, rather than their respective teachers in Woodville and Millbrook as they felt it allowed them to speak more honestly about their Physical Education experiences. Katie (Woodville) felt it was easier to speak to me than Ms. Brown because I was “not in a position to give out” and “say that we’re wrong”. While spaces had been created for students to speak about their experiences, the extent to which this occurred and was possible with their respective teachers was still limited. As with Fleming’s (2015) observation, the challenge for the teacher in the classroom is to develop effective learning strategies which allow the diversity of students’ voices to be heard through dialogue. While this challenge was to an extent overcome, students in Millbrook and Woodville still preferred to speak to me rather than their respective teachers.
Researchers need to discover better ways for teachers to access student voice, so students’ knowledge can better inform their practice (Dyson, 2006).

5.5.2 Physical Education Going Forward with Student Voice

The teachers believed that adopting student voice within Post-Primary Physical Education was sustainable. However, the extent to which it was sustainable differed within their respective contexts and the cohort of students that would be involved, as well as managing teachers’ and students’ time and expectations appropriately. Young people bring to school a range of backgrounds that shape and influence their multiple voices: their emotional capacity, their ethnicity, their sexuality, their social class, their geographies – their life experiences have an effect on what young people say, how they say it, where they say it and to whom they are willing to talk (Bragg 2001). For Ms. Brown, adopting a student voice approach with other groups meant being open to different responses and approaches. I was more cautious in my view of the sustainability of student voice within my classes. While I believed that “students had a vital part to play” in their own education, I also recognised “the amount of time that goes into it”. Student voice efforts, however committed they may be, will not by themselves achieve their aspirations unless a series of conditions are met that help make their desired intentions a living reality (Fielding, 2004). Simply put, it is one thing to say student voice is sustainable; but to put that into practice is far more onerous than one might initially think.

Teachers acknowledged that creating conditions for student voice was challenging but, ultimately rewarding. The main challenges involved a greater allocation of time towards planning; speaking, listening and responding appropriately to what students had to say; and, planning for the students’ Physical Education experiences to be more worthwhile, enjoyable and relevant. Working in negotiated ways with students can take significant time, particularly if a teacher’s decision is to adopt a negotiated approach (Glasby and McDonald, 2004). Students in Kinloch and Woodville wanted to continue developing opportunities for student voice as they too felt it was sustainable. For students like Tara (Woodville), “PE was better” when student voice had been facilitated. In Kinloch, Sean acknowledged that “PE class [was] changing” and it was “getting better bit by bit” as a result of the teachers’ efforts to listen to students. Integral to this process was the sustained approach and commitment to “authentic listening” on behalf of the teachers which could only be realised through their acknowledgment and response to the views expressed and suggestions made by students.
Students in Kinloch and Woodville were in no doubt that student voice could be sustained and, indeed extended. If anything, they were more certain of its value than the teachers.

In contrast, students in Millbrook were uncertain as to how student voice would shape their Physical Education experience in the future. Ultimately, when asked whether or not they felt they had reshaped their Physical Education experiences, students in Millbrook were not entirely convinced. While they acknowledged that while their voices were heard at times, it didn’t go far enough to reshape their overall experience of Physical Education. On the other hand, Mr. Green pointed out improvements in participation and engagement.

5.5.3 Reimagining Physical Education through Student Voice

Listening to students can provide valuable perspectives and new insights into the complexities of teaching and learning that can then be applied to improving the quality of physical education in our schools (Dyson, 2006). Teachers identified changes in their own personal views of the purpose of Physical Education having created conditions for student voice in their classes; that within Physical Education, they needed to focus more on the students’ needs and interests when teaching. Teachers observed a shift in their view of how to facilitate and create opportunities for enjoyment. Allowing a student to decide what activities they engage in during Physical Education not only ensures that they participate in activities they enjoy (soccer and frisbee in this case) but simultaneously results in avoiding participation in activities they dislike (Meegan, 2010). This meant teachers saw enjoyment as serving a greater purpose in Physical Education than previously thought. Such shifts require a revision of the focus, the structures and the participants in Physical Education pedagogical and curricular decision making (Enright & O Sullivan, 2013). It could also be argued that enjoyment came about as a result of students acquiring more responsibility and being more engaged in the nature of their learning experiences, brought on by their involvement in decision-making.

5.5.4 Student Voice in Post Primary Schools

Teachers felt that while a student voice approach was feasible, they felt more restricted when teaching other subjects, with less scope and flexibility to adapt and change content due to the greater emphasis on assessment and external examinations. Although student voices have the potential to make a unique contribution to curriculum making, the question of how to ensure
those voices are heard was unclear (Brooker and McDonald, 1999). Ms. Brown believed that she would try to encourage students to take lead roles within her Irish language classes. However, while she acknowledged that student voice could be “promoted in every subject”, she considered it “easier in PE” to adopt a student voice approach given challenges with language barriers in communication and managing the Irish curriculum.

Notably, teachers were uncertain as to where student voice could be meaningfully implemented within other curricula beyond Physical Education. I shared a similar view to Ms. Brown and Mr. Green in that I felt there was “less scope for me to adapt” what I was doing in English “where I had a syllabus, or a curriculum and I was getting that done no matter what”. Our thoughts mirrored those of Fleming (2015) who pointed towards ‘the perceived pressure of curriculum delivery, by internal and external assessments of students, and by school evaluation, arguably within a performance-orientated and outcomes-driven script’ (Pg. 237, 2015). The practice in Ireland of employing teachers to mark State examinations anonymously for summative purposes continues to be the predominant feature of assessment in post-primary schools (MacPhail & Murphy, 2017). So long as this continues, young people’s agency in shaping any current or future curriculum, and the power dynamics that produce young people's voices seem set to only slowly surface. (Biddulph, 2011). While new frameworks are currently being implemented which attempt to address this issue, the majority of these extend to Junior Cycle with a Leaving Certificate frameworks yet to be disseminated.

The teachers differed in the level of optimism and certainty over how student voice would be received and implemented across their schools. Teachers need to be supported in authorising students’ perspectives and supporting students’ critical engagement (Enright & O’ Sullivan, 2013). Ms. Brown believed teachers needed to be open to change and willing to try different things and make mistakes. She noted the need for teachers to work collaboratively and engage in their own professional development. Mr. Green, despite acknowledging at the beginning of the study that management supported and encouraged teachers to work collaboratively with students, felt that additional support in the form of teacher collaboration, continued professional development, and a greater whole school approach would be needed to create authentic student voice experiences.

My cautious viewpoint centred on a concern about support for both me and other teachers. I felt that while adopting a student voice approach meant that teachers and schools had “the best of intentions”, they may become “lost in translation or very tokenistic” or
become a “box-ticking exercise”. Taking the opportunity to promote a culture of listening and caring is not possible without the support and vision of the school leader and/or significant personnel in the school (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011). Similar to Flynn’s (2014) view, a “bottom-up approach” such as that which occurred in this study is redundant without an appropriate “top down” response from management (pg. 171, 2014). Yet, my thoughts, juxtaposed with those of Mr. Green suggest that even if a “top down” response is implemented, teachers themselves too need to step up also to promote a worthwhile culture of listening and caring.

5.6 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in post-primary Irish Physical Education alongside students and identify the consequences this has for future practice and policy in schools. The findings suggest that while teachers initially felt their schools listened to their students constructively and allowed for students to take on equal roles within Physical Education and the school, the reality in which this played out was more limited and tokenistic. However, by the end of the study teachers and students observed notable changes in teacher practice and their own dispositions to student voice. While much of the change in practice was dialogic (i.e. allowed opportunities for students to provide feedback to teacher), it still allowed students to influence the decision-making processes compared to before. The impact of creating conditions for student voice meant that teachers planned more for their classes to better meet the needs and requests of their students, while maintaining alignment with and designated learning outcomes of the national curriculum. Although time consuming, teachers felt that such an approach was ultimately worthwhile and rewarding.

Significantly creating conditions for student voice did not appear to impact on learning and assessment in Physical Education across the three schools. It did, however, impact on greatly on student engagement within classes. Creating conditions for student voice in post-primary schools as it occurred in this study also has the potential to impact teacher-student relationships positively. The challenges faced by the teachers were seen by them as positive developments; that creating opportunities for student voice had challenged them for the better to listen to their students authentically and respond in order to improve their Physical Education. However, despite the best of intentions, students can still feel short changed. The sense of uncertainty in Millbrook suggest that if students don’t see the change they expect to see, it can be difficult for them to feel that any change has occurred at all. The
fact that teachers were not forthcoming in adopting a student voice approach within their examination subjects indicates a lack of confidence or reluctance on their part to re-imagine their subjects. The topics and themes arising from this discussion form the basis of the conclusions, implications and recommendations in the next chapter.
Chapter Six
Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction
This section summarises the main findings of the study. It highlights areas where more work is needed and suggests avenues for future development of this work within Irish post-primary Physical Education and, across post-primary schools. A number of implications and recommendations for policymakers, teaching bodies and, indeed, teachers themselves are presented as well as an agenda for research that continues the spirit of enquiry and understanding of student voice spawned by this study.

6.2 Student Voice – Moving beyond the Status Quo
A concern among some advocates of student voice work is the possibility that the oversimplification of the issues involved in changing school culture to make it more responsive to students will lead to tokenism, manipulation, and practices not matching rhetoric (Cook-Sather, 2006). It appears that this concern is indeed the case and is being played out across many post-primary school contexts. Similar to previous studies (Fleming, 2015; Devine, 2017), there was a discernible contrast in how teachers believed they facilitated student voice prior to the study, and how students experienced and observed this. Student councils are one example of this. While the policy discourse defines and bounds the operation of the student council in schools, it is clear that the construct has been circumscribed by the power and authority discourses of school management (Fleming 2015).

Despite this, the teachers in this study did acknowledge that they wanted to listen to their students and allow their voices to be heard. Vice versa, students felt that their voices could be heard and teachers could adapt to facilitate increased levels of student voice. Students also wanted to have a greater say in the decision-making process which up to then, lay firmly in the control of the teachers. Although current curricular frameworks and government legislation indicate a commitment to listening to what our young people have to say and allowing them to inform us how we can improve their educational experiences, the manner in which this plays out at the coalface of Irish post-primary schools appears limited and tokenistic (Smyth & Calvert, 2011; Flynn 2014; Fleming 2015). Moving student voice initiatives beyond Fielding’s (2012) low level phases of students as data sources and co-
enquirers towards students as joint authors and intergenerational learning as a lived democracy is unlikely to occur unless teachers and schools are willing to look differently at the way they speak and listen to their students. Pearce and Wood’s (2016) dialogic phase has the ability to involve students meaningfully beyond the norm. If student voice is to be genuinely evaluated and created within schools, then it’s time to move beyond the status quo; recognising that the ways we think we listen to and involve our students in their learning experiences are not recognised by students as giving them enough autonomy and influence.

6.3 Encouraging Dialogic Encounters

What is clear from this study is that students want to talk and teachers want to listen. Encouraging real dialogue has the potential for post-primary schools and teachers to re-imagine their subjects and classes. However, getting students and teachers to have real talks is easier said than done. New spaces need to be created to do so. Students in this study called for a degree of anonymity through which they could voice their thoughts and ideas and ensure less assertive voices were not disregarded. While this somewhat contradicts the notion of encouraging students to speak out openly about their educational experiences, it may very well be a necessary starting block in some school contexts through which dialogic interaction can begin to occur. Yet, is it realistic to expect students to be able to speak out when they feel they haven’t been heard before? Entering the territory of student voice is fraught with some difficulty and uncertainty (Sandford and Duncombe, 2010). Affording students the opportunity to speak up in this study meant that they and their teachers had to continuously redefine what was acceptable dialogue and what might be perceived as pushing the boundaries. This interaction can be misconstrued by students as an opportunity to exercise vocal autonomy rather than one which allows them to speak and listen alongside the teacher, working towards mutual understanding and decision making which are adequate for both parties, as was the case with Mr. Green and this Teacher-Researcher at certain points. Truth is constructed and unstable, and the task is one of unravelling the multiple ways in which it is produced, its effects, and the ways subjectivities are enabled and/or constrained in relation to it (Burrows, 2010). In the end, teachers felt that they had managed to accomplish this, even if it was only the beginning of their commitment to this endeavour.

Emergent methodologies, that are cognizant of emergent theoretical perspectives and research questions, can be useful for listening and responding to these young people in authentic ways (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Methodologies and procedures adopted in this
study proved beneficial in helping participants to listen and respond to each other. However, that is not to say that still didn’t need to be refined and tailored to suit their contexts and participants’ needs. It is important to remember that dialogue doesn’t have to be the spoken word; we can speak in different ways; writing, initially through writing anonymously emerged as one of the most successful ways of identifying students’ thoughts and ideas. While this isn’t something new, this study serves as a gentle reminder to Irish post-primary teachers that doing so can be a starting block towards more advanced engagement with students in their learning. Students felt that they were influencing the decision-making process more than ever before, meaning that they and the teachers were slowly but surely moving towards a **collective, inclusive** and **intergenerational** phase, even if this was still at an early stage.

**6.4 Teacher Student Relationships – sort of along the same lines?**

Engaging with a student voice approach meant that teachers and students came to respect each other’s agency, even if it wasn’t always what they hoped it would be. Although relationships developed, issues over power and relinquishing control challenged teachers throughout the study. While elements of student voice were undoubtedly created and facilitated, there remained some uncertainty from Mr. Green and I in allowing students control over how classes were presented and progressed. While students were willing to take on the challenge, teachers expressed early concerns over how allowing students the opportunity to provide feedback and critique lessons would affect them. This would suggest that although teachers may feel that they are listening and speaking to students authentically, and indeed want to and are committed to doing so, the reality of how this plays out from the student’ perspectives may differ greatly, as was the case in Millbrook. Despite being willing to create conditions for student voice, teachers still noted the need to maintain some levels of control and authority around certain elements of the teaching environment which, at times, compromised how they listened and responded to students. While boundaries were challenged at times by students in the study, teachers still positioned themselves as final adjudicators of what was acceptable and what was not. Given the responsibility and duty of care entrusted to teachers, and their considered experiences as trained educators working with young people, is it legitimate to imagine a point where students’ influence and power could equally match or even supersede that of the teachers for certain elements of the teaching-learning enterprise? It is arguably impossible for teachers to listen to student voice if their
voices have been muted (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010). As teachers, while we must strive to achieve greater parity in the way we work with our students, we must also ensure that we are placing ourselves in the best possible place to help guide them forward in our schools and our subjects as we see correct.

6.5 The Future of Student Voice in Post-Primary Physical Education

Listening to students caused teachers in this study to re-consider their visions for Physical Education. In creating conditions for student voice, teachers hoped to bring about positive classroom experiences reflective of enjoyment, increased responsibility and investment from their students who, similarly, hoped to become partners in co-constructing their classroom experiences. Teachers began to restructure how they were instructing students, facilitating more activity and greater student engagement. While affording students more opportunities for activity and engagement, it is important not to confuse such teaching intentions with what Placek (1983) describes as “busy, happy and good” (pg. 49) approaches to teaching Physical Education. Teachers in this study still insisted on aligning their teaching with the learning outcomes of the curriculum.

The fact that student’s active engagement in lessons increased despite no change to students’ learning and assessment suggests that not enough emphasis was placed on learning and assessment within these Physical Education classes and, consequently, teachers and students valued being active and engaged over learning and being assessed. Based on this study, a student voice approach to Physical Education has the potential first and foremost to engage students more within classes and, that any attempt to impact on learning and assessment would require further consideration of how teachers and students work together. Hastie et. al. (2013) argue that for students to value engagement in sport and physical activity beyond their school years, Physical Education teachers themselves, together with their pedagogies and curricula, must also produce learning experiences for young people that lead them to become intrinsically motivated to perform physical activity. The new Junior Cycle Physical Education short course, Senior Cycle Physical Education syllabus, and Leaving Certificate Physical Education look set to challenge current conditions where engagement is valued over learning intentions and assessment. Regardless of forthcoming changes in the presentation of learning and assessment, this study would indicate that students need to be heard by teachers and further engaged by Physical Education. Marrying engagement with relevant learning experiences and formative assessment practices is something that was yet to
be realised for participants in this study. Future attempts to adopt a student voice approach must consider how it can help students’ learning and allow them to assess how they participate and what they learn in Physical Education in a confident, constructive and informed way.

6.6 Student Voice across Schools

The fact that teachers were not forthcoming in adopting a student voice approach with high stakes examination based subjects indicates a lack of confidence or, perhaps, a reluctance to re-imagine their high stakes examination subjects. Taking the opportunity to promote a culture of listening and caring is not possible without the support and vision of the school leader and significant personnel (Shevlin & Flynn, 2011). The teachers in this study were indifferent and uncertain as to whether or not the support, vision and personnel were present in their schools. When it came to creating conditions for student voice in subjects which had a greater focus on assessment, teachers were cautious about doing so. It would appear that efforts to create further conditions for student voice in Irish post-primary schools would be met with a caution by teachers in this study. Such an approach which deviates from what is considered success for their students in their respective examination subjects could be undermined and hijacked by already institutionalised practices in the Irish post-primary school context which are grounded in a discourse that focuses students’ learning on a curriculum and a high stakes external examination that reflects the needs of the economy and the adult world and that does not allow genuine consultation with students on decisions about their lives in schools or classrooms (Fleming, 2013). Because of who the teachers in this study are, where they have come from already, what they may feel they already know and how they perceive their role, they still recognised the need to be supported in authorizing students’ perspectives and supporting students’ critical engagement. Similar to Fleming’s (2015) observations, rolling out student voice across their entire school and trying to sustain it also requires an appreciation of the complexity and challenge of how such an interaction occurs. It would appear that such an appreciation needs to be further explored.

6.7 Managing Student Voice

While overall teachers felt that the study had been a positive experience and brought about improvements in their Physical Education programmes and the way they worked with their
students, challenges were identified which included the time such an approach demanded and the increased planning such an approach entailed. The impact of creating conditions for student voice meant that teachers planned more for their classes to better meet the needs and requests of their students, all the while juggling this change in practice alongside curricular alignment with the designated learning outcomes of the national curriculum. While time consuming, teachers felt that such an approach was ultimately worthwhile and rewarding. Teachers who hope to focus on student voice need to be prepared to spend a great deal of time working with young people if they hope to observe significant changes in the way they work with their students (Oliver, 2010). While an improvement in dialogic interaction undoubtedly occurred in this study, it was only beginning to scrape the surface of what was possible, despite the considerable time put in by the teachers, students, and this teacher-researcher. For student voice to be meaningful and sustainable, it needs to be manageable; thus, possibly limiting the amount of opportunities across the school; somewhat contradicting the basic principle that students should have opportunities to speak out and be heard. Seeing below the surface may take more time than teachers are willing, or even able at that, to give at a time when subject planning and evaluating student work is demanding more of teachers than ever before in Ireland. For Mr. Green, an immediate issue was to address the levels of participation in his classes based on what he had heard from his students. While he was successful in accomplishing this, students were still uncertain as to what had really changed in their Physical Education experiences compared to before. While Mr. Green felt he had listened and responded to students based on this, and students acknowledged that this had happened, they begged to differ as to if this constituted significant change for them in how they participated and perceived Physical Education.

On a deeper level for me, my students never got the opportunity to experience genuine transgressive change which could have provided them with the tools or medium to resist, escape or transform systems that promote inequality (Pearce & Wood, 2016). The question unearthed in the literature review earlier remains; can a teacher make time for negotiation with several classes in planning units of work, given the demands they are under already? And, would it then be possible to facilitate greater interaction between teachers and students which moved towards Fielding’s (2012) vision of a lived democracy? The responses of the teachers in this study would suggest that this may not be possible over the course of time they have with all their students in post-primary school unless there is significantly more infrastructure and time is allocated. Furthermore, space is needed within school timetables.
specifically dedicated to student voice. If we, as teachers, are going to take the necessary time to listen and speak to our students meaningfully, how will this be facilitated and recognised within timetabling and whole-school planning? For me, the spaces and time needed as teachers to do this do not seem to be there. Only when we are given formally recognised times within our school schedules beyond classroom interaction to do so can we really begin to delve deeper into student voice.

6.8 Key Implications for Practice

The following is a list of key implications for students, teachers, researchers and policymakers who seek to create conditions for student voice in the future:

1. Further exploration of student voice, what it entails, and what it can offer to current and pre-service teachers in terms of a pedagogical approach to improving student engagement within their subjects is required from policymakers such as the NCCA and the Department of Education and Skills as well as entities such as The Teaching Council and the teacher education sector. This can be done by encouraging further research initiatives and calling on teachers to familiarise themselves better with student voice and its place within the framework of Junior Cycle and across post-primary schools.

2. Creating conditions for student voice is time consuming and onerous. Appropriate time and spaces need to be provided to teachers and students within present and future curricular frameworks in Irish post-primary schools where they can begin this process. This needs to be formally scheduled rather than being expected to be fitted in with current demands and requirements.

3. Increased interaction and communication is needed in classrooms between students and teachers which extends beyond a dialogic level towards more inclusive and collective and intergenerational dialogue and decision making. Only then can transformative educational experiences within Irish post primary education begin to occur.

4. A clear mandate in continued professional development from the JCT and PDST which supports teachers and school managements and encourages and challenges them to take on student voice initiatives which could significantly
transform the way they and their schools work with and involve their students in decision-making and evaluating their schools as learning communities.

6.10 Future Research Recommendations

This study has highlighted both the complexity and challenges involved in creating conditions for student voice in Irish post-primary schools alongside the potential and promise it offers. Future research needs to investigate how student voice can be better realised and implemented effectively within this context.

The findings and outcomes are relative to the three case studies used and, as such, not reflective of educational contexts nationally. Future research needs to explore how such an approach to evaluating and creating conditions for student voice might work with students of a similar age group in a greater variety of post primary education contexts (i.e. DEIS, Voluntary, Non-Voluntary and Educate Together Schools in urban and rural settings).

The extent to which student learning was impacted in this study as a consequence of creating conditions for student voice was limited. Future research needs to explore how learning can be influenced by a student voice approach.

Given that this study was centred around Junior Cycle Physical Education classes which were adopting the JCPE curriculum, the implications of this study invites research of a similar nature in other school subjects to determine if the New Junior Cycle Framework and additional frameworks and curricula are effectively placing students at the centre of the learning experience through adopting similar student voice experiences. The viability of student voice as a successful and genuine concept within the current Irish discourse of high stakes external assessment and internationally needs more extensive research investment. Some comment here about the viability of the success of student voice in a high stakes education system?

6.10 Final Word

As an emerging discourse in Irish education, student voice is complex and contested in its position within policy and practice in Irish schools, with its translation into practice still requiring discussion, debate and clarification at both policy and school level (Fleming, 2015). While student voice may not be as prevalent or advanced in Irish post-primary schools, even the most elementary approaches adopted by teachers in this study had the capacity to engage
and empower students beyond what was the norm. A decade ago, Shevlin and Rose (2008) asserted that there were serious reservations about the lack of infrastructure to support the students’ voice within schools in the Republic of Ireland. Now, it appears that, within Irish post-primary schools, despite recent frameworks, it is still something new and unexplored by many students, schools and teachers (Fleming 2015). If students are to truly be listened to, then they must believe that they can communicate with their teachers without fear or apprehension. As teachers, we should never underestimate the potential and promise students can bring to our classrooms and their learning; we just need to listen and talk more with them to realise this. This is something teachers need to consider: how can we help our students to communicate with us in a constructive manner? Alongside this, students themselves need to learn, and be shown, to take responsibility for their voices in support of their learning and that of their peers.

In exploring how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in Irish post-primary Physical Education, the greater macrocosm of student voice within schools is called into question. Teachers and policymakers must tread softly, ensuring the opportunity to advance student voice as a human dialogic interaction within an inclusive classroom and school culture is not intercepted by a drive towards measurable improvements in standards (Fleming, 2013). Based on this, it is important that teachers and schools do not to misapply student voice as something which is being done because they are being asked to do it, becoming a spurious commitment to exhibiting required standards in school, without being embraced in its purest self.

There is a growing awareness among policy makers and teachers of what student voice is and the value it has for students. This study serves to add to this knowledge base by acknowledging the positive impact a student voice approach can bring to different school settings. However, the participants in this study also tell us that while the need and will is there, we still have a while to go and more to do before we can start to see authentic spaces in Irish post-primary schools where student voice is understood and embraced as a facet of school life rather than a novelty. The findings of this study serve not to blister the potential and possibilities of student voice, but rather ask policymakers, researchers and stakeholders to recognise where we, as teachers and students, are coming from before we begin to be encouraged to work in this way; for every school, every teacher, and every student, brings with them a distinct fountain of challenges and opportunities. It serves as a reminder from teachers, who are committed to their students and ultimately want what’s best for them, that
more needs to be done, firstly by teachers themselves; to embrace the idea of listening to their students, working with them and creating a genuine sense of collegiality within their subjects. Teachers need to be brave; they need to move away from their traditional roles and positions of control; expanding their capacities as co-enquirers of school curriculum with their students. In line with Mary, a student in Millbrook, we might share her thoughts on teachers listening to students: “It’s important that a teacher does that”. If the spirit of the recent education legislation and fresh curricula in Ireland is to be upheld and implemented, it is necessary to adopt a committed approach to practice and research, ensuring that teachers and schools best serve the needs of their students. While this may take time, the simple words of Sean, a student from Kinloch best sum up why we must advance forward firmly doing so:

“When you add to it, it’s getting better bit by bit”
References


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Appendix A: Ethical Approval/Consent

PRINCIPAL LETTER
Creating conditions for student voice in post primary Irish Physical Education

Dear Principal,

I am a qualified Physical Education teacher currently completing a part time research masters at the University of Limerick. As part of my studies, I am proposing to conduct research on how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in post-primary Irish Physical Education. I would be grateful if you would consider allowing me to seek consent from the Physical Education teacher in your school to allow me to carry out this study in one of his PE classes. I would also be grateful if you would allow me to seek consent students and their parents/guardians to allow me carry out this study.

The pupils’ and teacher’s involvement in this project would be primarily during their timetabled school day- e.g. Physical Education classes. The participating pupils would be invited to be involved in classroom experiences, as well as focus group sessions with some of their peers. The pupils would be asked to answer questions regarding their perceptions of Physical Education and the type of programme they would like to see implemented as part of their learning experience. The students will be provided the opportunity to take photographs of their learning in class. The coordinating teacher will also be interviewed in order to gain his/her opinions and attitude towards the project. From these discussions, both teacher and pupils will look to facilitate student voice as a means of constructing a positive learning environment in Physical Education classes. This participation may benefit the participating pupils in their participation in sport/physical activity and in designing a Physical Education programme that is meaningful and worthwhile to them. The findings of the study might also help Physical Education teachers and others to provide more positive and meaningful physical education experiences for more adolescents in junior and senior cycle curricula.

While we will ask the students about their experiences, the participating pupils would not be required to answer any question they do not wish to. Students will receive guidance on the ethics of photographing other people and basic photography skills in lesson 1 in Phase 4. The information they do give would be kept confidential and stored on the researcher’s computer with a protection password. The information will be anonymised and kept for a period of seven years, after which it will be deleted and/or disposed of sensitively as per UL ethical guidelines.

Participation in this study would be entirely voluntary and the pupils and/or their parents/carers may chose not to consent or to withdraw and discontinue participation in this study at any time. If you have any concerns or questions about the project as you come to arrive at your decision
about whether or not to allow me to undertake this study in your school, either myself or my project supervisor (Prof. Mary O’ Sullivan) would be happy to discuss them with you. Please feel free to contact us at any time. Attached to this letter are information and consent sheets that have been approved by the University’s Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee which will provide you with a greater insight into the proposed research project. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

________________________
Donal Howley

Project Investigator Contact Details

Principal Investigator
Professor Mary O’Sullivan, PESS Dept. University of Limerick, Tel (061) 202949
Email: mary.osullivan@ul.ie

Other investigator
Donal Howley
Postgraduate Student
PESS Department
(087) 9032112
0861189@studentmail.ul.ie

This study has been approved by the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (XXXXXXXXXXXXX). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact The EHS Research Ethics Contact Point of the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Room E1003, University of Limerick, Limerick. Tel (061) 234101 / Email: ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Dear Parent/Carer,

As part of a postgraduate project in the University of Limerick, I am conducting research on how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in post-primary Irish Physical Education. This information sheet will inform you about the study.

What is the study about?
The project aims to elicit teachers’ and students’ thoughts on how and why they accommodate student voice in the design, delivery and assessment of their PE programmes. The researcher will facilitate teachers and students in discovering further approaches through which they can evaluate and furthermore facilitate meaningful student voice in physical education using a variety of shared methods. In doing so, it is hoped that we can investigate the consequences of greater focus on accommodating student voice in Physical Education for (a) teachers and (b) student learning.

What will your child have to do?
Your child’s involvement in this project will be primarily during the timetabled school day- e.g. Physical Education classes. He/She will be invited to be involved in classroom experiences, as well focus group sessions with some of their peers. The pupils would be asked to answer some questions in these focus group sessions regarding their perceptions of Physical Education and the type of programme they would like to see implemented as part of their learning experience. The focus groups will involve 5-6 students being asked to answer questions and discuss how student voice is evaluated and created within Physical Education classes.

What are the benefits?
This might benefit your child in terms of thinking and analysing the reasons for why they participate in sport/physical activity, designing a Physical Education programme that is meaningful and worthwhile to them as well as implementing a curriculum that is designed to meet their needs. The findings of the study might help physical education teachers and others to provide more positive and meaningful physical education and physical activity experiences for more adolescents in the Irish post primary settings through facilitating opportunities for student voice.

What are the risks?
While we will ask the students about their experiences, the participating pupils will not be required to answer any question they do not wish to. Students will receive guidance on the ethics of photographing other people and basic photography skills in lesson 1. Students who do not wish to be photographed can select to opt out by selecting to do so on the participant consent form. Should they select to allow themselves to be photographed but later wish to opt out during the study, they will have this wish respected. This can be done by notifying the teacher or researcher orally or in writing.
What if my child does not want to take part?
Participation in this study is voluntary and your child can choose not to consent or to withdraw consent and stop participating in this study at any time. In addition, you can choose not to consent or to withdraw consent and stop your child participating in this study at any time.

What happens to the information?
The information that is collected will be kept confidential and stored on the researchers’ computer with a protection password. The information will be anonymised and kept for a period of seven years, after which it will be deleted and/or disposed of appropriately in compliance with University of Limerick ethics procedures.

Who else is taking part?
The study will involve pupils from your child’s class who are assigned to the Physical Education class in which the study will take place and a similar cohort from two other schools.

What if something goes wrong?
In the unlikely event that something goes wrong during the focus group session, the interview session will immediately stop until the investigator and participant(s) are ready to resume the session or the session would be stopped completely.

What happens at the end of the study?
At the end of the study the information will be used to present results using the format required for postgraduate research. All information will be completely anonymised. The results of the research will be available to participants on written request to the Principal Investigator.

What if I have more questions or do not understand something?
If you have any questions related to any aspect of the study you may contact either of the researchers. It is important that you feel that all your questions have been answered.

What happens if I change my mind during the study?
At any stage should you feel that you want your child to discontinue being a participant, your child is free to stop and take no further part. There are no consequences to your child should you change your mind about their participation in the study.

Contact name and number of Project Investigators.
Principal Investigator
Professor Mary O’Sullivan, PESS Dept. University of Limerick, Tel (061) 202949
Email: mary.osullivan@ul.ie

Other investigator
Donal Howley
Undergraduate Student
PESS Department
(087) 9032112
0861189@studentmail.ul.ie

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I would be grateful if you would consider participating in this study.
Yours sincerely,

Mary O’ Sullivan          Donal Howley

This study has been approved by the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (XXXXXXXXXXXX). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact The EHS Research Ethics Contact Point of the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Room E1003, University of Limerick, Limerick. Tel (061) 234101 / Email: ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Dear Student,
As part of a postgraduate project in the University of Limerick, I am conducting research on how teachers evaluate and create conditions for student voice in post-primary Irish Physical Education. This information sheet will inform you about the study.

**What is the study about?**
The project aims to gather teachers’ and students’ views so that you can have a say in how and why you accommodate student voice in the design, delivery and assessment of their PE programmes. The researcher will work with teachers and students in discovering ways to better engage students in their PE classes. In doing so, we hoped that we can learn more about how best to improve your quality of PE and investigate the consequences of greater focus on accommodating student voice in Physical Education for (a) teachers and (b) student learning.

**What will I have to do?**
Your involvement in this project will be primarily during your timetabled school day- e.g. Physical Education classes. You will be invited to be involved in classroom experiences, as well focus group sessions with some of your peers. You will be given the opportunity to take photographs in your classes and discuss what these mean to you. If you engage in the focus group interviews, you will be asked to answer some questions regarding your perceptions of Physical Education and the type of programme you would like to see and implement as part of your classes. The focus groups will involve 5-6 students being asked to answer questions and discuss their participation in Physical Education in a group setting.

**What are the benefits?**
This might benefit you in terms of thinking and analysing the reasons for why you participate in sport/physical activity, designing a Physical Education programme that is meaningful and worthwhile to you as well as implementing a curriculum that is designed to meet both yours and your peers’ needs. The findings of the study might help physical education teachers and others to provide more positive and meaningful physical education and physical activity experiences for more adolescents in post primary settings through facilitating opportunities for student voice.

**What are the risks?**
While we will ask you about your experiences, you will not be required to answer any question you do not wish to. You will receive guidance on the ethics of photographing other people and basic photography skills in lesson 1. If you do not wish to be photographed during the study, you can opt out by selecting to do so on the participant consent form. Should you select to allow yourself to be photographed but later wish to opt out during the study, you will have this wish respected. This can be done by notifying the teacher or researcher orally or in writing.
Who else is taking part?
The study will involve pupils from your class, and a similar cohort from two other schools.

What happens to the information?
Your views, however important, will not be identifiable. The information that is collected will be kept confidential and stored on the researchers’ computer with a protection password. The information will be anonymised and kept for a period of seven years, after which it will be deleted and/or disposed of appropriately in compliance with University of Limerick ethics procedures.

What if I do not want to take part?
Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to consent or to withdraw consent and stop participating in this study at any time.

What if something goes wrong? In the unlikely event that something goes wrong during the focus group session, the interview session will immediately stop until the investigator and participant(s) are ready to resume the session or the session would be stopped completely.

What happens at the end of the study? At the end of the study the information will be used to present results using the format required for postgraduate research. I will be happy to talk to you about the results of the research if you wish by visiting your school.

What if I have more questions or do not understand something?
If you have any questions related to any aspect of the study you may contact either of the researchers. It is important that you feel that all your questions have been answered.

What happens if I change my mind during the study?
At any stage should you feel that you want to discontinue being a participant, you are free to stop and take no further part. There are no consequences for changing your mind about participating in the study.

Contact name and number of Project Investigators.
Principal Investigator
Professor Mary O’Sullivan, PESS Dept. University of Limerick, Tel (061) 202949
Email: mary.osullivan@ul.ie

Other investigator
Donal Howley
Undergraduate Student
PESS Department
(087) 9032112
0861189@studentmail.ul.ie

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I would be grateful if you would consider participating in this study.
Yours sincerely,

Mary O’ Sullivan   Donal Howley

This study has been approved by the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (XXXXXXXXXXXXX). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact The EHS Research Ethics Contact Point of the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Room E1003, University of Limerick, Limerick. Tel (061) 234101 / Email: ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
PARENTAL/CARER CONSENT

Title of Study: Creating conditions for student voice in Irish post-primary Physical Education

- I have read and understood the parent/carer information sheet.
- I understand the purpose of the study and how the results will be used.
- I consent for the data to be used anonymously in report format and published output.
- I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving my child, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.
- I know that my child’s participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw my child from the study at any stage without giving a reason.

For the parent/carer

I permit consent for ______________________ (please print name of child) to participate in the above study.

Name of Parent/Carer: (please print): ____________________

Parent Signature: ______________________________

Date: ____________

Investigator’s Signature: ___________________________

Date: ____________
PARTICIPANT CONSENT
Title of Study: Creating conditions for student voice in Irish post-primary Physical Education

Should you agree to participate in this study please read the statements below and if you agree to them, please sign the consent form.

- I have read and understand the participant information sheet.
- I understand what the project is about, and how the results will be used.
- I understand that what the researchers find in this study maybe shared with others but that my name will not be given to anyone in any written material developed.
- I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving myself, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.
- I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving a reason.
- I consent to my involvement in this research project after agreeing to the above statements.
- Do you consent/not consent to allow photographs to be taken of you during this research project? Please tick appropriate box:  □ Yes, I consent  □ No, I do not consent

Name: (please print): _____________________________

Signature: ________________________________

Witness Signature: ____________________________

Date: ______________________________________

Investigator’s Signature: ____________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Student Focus Group Interview Questions Pre-Engagement

Focus Group Interview One with Student Cohort Pre-Engagement

**Purpose of Physical Education in students’ lives**

1. Think about Physical Education. What do you think is the purpose of Physical Education as a school subject?

2. What gives you the most enjoyment in Physical Education? What gives you the least enjoyment?

3. What do you think of Physical Education compared to other subjects? Difficult? Relevant? Interesting?

4. How would you compare PE to other subjects as part of your education in school?

**Planning for Physical Education classes**

5. How do you think about and plan/prepare for Physical Education class normally? Does it differ from other subjects? If so how and why?

6. How much of a say do you have in the planning of your Physical Education classes? Could you give examples of this?

7. Think about how you would like to contribute in the planning of your Physical Education classes? What would it look like? What part would you play?

**Learning and Pedagogy**

8. What do you feel you have learned in Physical Education? Which learning approaches work best for you in PE class? Give examples. Which do you enjoy the most? Which do you dislike to most? Why?

9. Do you think the way classes are taught at the moment allow for your voices to be heard? How could the teacher help this?

10. Is there ways the teacher could help you learn better?

11. How would you like to see Physical Education classes going in the future? What role would you like to play? What role do you see the teacher playing?

**Assessment**

12. Are you assessed in Physical Education classes? If yes, how?

13. If you had a say in assessment in your Physical Education class, what would you include/exclude? Why? Can you give an example of an assessment that would make sense for PE?

14. Any further comments? Anything you would like to add to the discussion?
Appendix C: Student Focus Group Interview Questions Early Engagement

Focus Group Interview with Students Early Engagement

1) What have been the significant changes that you have observed or experienced in Physical Education lessons? Have there been many?

2) Describe the different processes that you went through with the teacher/researcher. Were they successful? Were they helpful? Where could it have been improved? What was omitted?

3) What practices were most successful in giving you, the student, the opportunity to voice your ideas about physical education and physical activity? (Meetings? Feedback Sheets? Discussion?)

4) Reflect on the classes you participated in this term. What did you enjoy/dislike about these classes? What did you learn about yourself and your peers? What roles did you have to perform?

6) In what way do you feel that as students you challenged the presentation of physical education classes in the school?

7) How did the increased efforts to hear your voices impact on your engagement with physical education and physical activity? Were you involved more? Did you have to change the way you approached PE?

8) How did the increased efforts to hear your voices impact on your learning in physical education? What have you learned?

9) Could you see/feel a change in your involvement in Physical Education classes and the way the lessons were being presented to you?

10) Has the inclusion of students’ views (you and your peers) affected your investment and ownership of the PE program? Has it improved? Deteriorated?

11) Where would you like to see Physical Education classes go from here?

(Back to previous programme? Continue using the current approach? Adopt a new program?)

12) Can the approach used by the teacher/researcher and the class be sustained going forward? What role do you see yourself playing in Physical Education classes? What role would you like to play in Physical Education classes in the future?
Appendix D: Student Focus Group Interview Questions Post Engagement

Focus Group Interview with Students Cohorts Post Engagement

Students will be presented with a number of responses given to questions that were recorded in the previous two focus group interviews at various intervals during the interview.

1) Think back over the last two terms of Physical Education in school. What have been the significant changes that you have observed or experienced in Physical Education lessons? (If yes can you tell me about them? If not, how would you describe what you have done in PE)

2) What practices were most successful in giving you, the student, the opportunity to voice your ideas about physical education and physical activity? (Meetings? Feedback Sheets? Discussion?)

3) Reflect on the classes you participated in the last term. What did you enjoy/dislike about these classes? What did you learn about yourself and your peers? What roles did you have to perform?

4) In what way do you feel that as students you have helped reshape how physical education classes are presented to you in the school over the last two terms?

5) How did the increased efforts to hear your voices impact on your learning in physical education? What have you learned?

6) Has the inclusion of students’ views (you and your peers) affected your investment and ownership of the PE program? Has it improved? Deteriorated?

7) Where do you see Physical Education classes go from here in the next term? Have you some suggestions? (Back to previous programme? Continue using the current approach? Adopt a new program?)

8) What role do you see yourself playing in Physical Education classes in the future? What role would you like to play in Physical Education classes in the future?

Additional:
Is there are subject in school that has a similar feel/format that you experience in PE...can you describe what that is?

What does learning mean to you?

How do you see the differences (if any) in learning/relationships/role based on the subject in focus when working with the teacher?
Appendix E: One-on-One Interview Questions for Teachers Pre-Engagement

Researcher’s One-on-One Interview with Teachers Pre-Engagement

Planning
1. As a teacher, how do you think about and plan/prepare for Physical Education class normally? Who or what influences the planning of Physical Education classes? Who or What influences planning of your Physical Education programme?

2. In your school, consider where you are in terms of partnerships with students. Is there an effort to listen/pay attention to your students’ voices/interests/abilities in planning your lessons/units?

3. In what ways would you like your students to have a greater/lesser say in the planning of your Physical Education classes? How might you get started in doing this? Who would be involved?

Teaching and Learning
4. How does learning take place in your Physical Education classes at present? Give Examples.

5. Do you think the way you teach classes at the moment allows for your students’ voices to be heard? Can you provide an example of where a student’s voice is heard? What strategies do you already use?

6. What strategies could you use to further create conditions for student voice in your classroom.

7. Think about Physical Education classes going forward? In what areas and roles would you like your students to be more involved and take responsibility? What role do you see yourself playing within this?

Assessment
8. How do you conduct assessment in Physical Education? Describe a typical assessment you use?

9. What assessments do you find really useful?

10. What other assessments would you like to use?

Hopes and Fears
11. What do you hope to achieve from this for (a) yourself and (b) your students?

12. What concerns/fears do you have about this process?

13. How would you assess if this project was successful? What indications from your students and yourself would you look for? What tools could we use to assess this?

14. Any further comments? Anything you would like to add to the discussion
Appendix F: Focus Group Questions for Teachers Early Engagement

Focus Group Interview with Teachers Early Engagement

1) What have been the significant changes that you have observed or experienced in your Physical Education lessons? Have there been many?

2) Describe the different processes that you went through with your students. Were they successful? Were they helpful? Where could it have been improved? What was omitted?

3) What practices were most successful in giving your students the opportunity to voice your ideas about physical education and physical activity? (Meetings? Feedback Sheets? Discussion?)

6) In what way do you feel that students challenged your approach to delivering physical education classes in the school?

7) How did the increased efforts to hear your students’ voices impact on their engagement with physical education and physical activity?

8) How did the increased efforts to hear students’ voices impact on their learning in physical education?

9) Where would you like to see Physical Education classes go from here? (Back to previous programme? Continue using the current approach? Adopt a new program?)

10) Can the approach used by you, the teacher, and the class be sustained going forward? What role do you see yourself playing in Physical Education classes? What role would you like to play in Physical Education classes in the future?

11) Has your approach to teaching and working with students changed as a result of using student voice in your Physical Education classes? Has your vision for what an educated PE student should look like changed?

12) What place do you think student voice has as a pedagogical approach to use in teaching Physical Education in Ireland?
Appendix G: One-on-One Interview Questions for Teachers Post Engagement

One-on-One Interview with Teacher Post Engagement

Teachers Practices

Q1. Describe the practices you have used to engage/extend student voice in your classroom this last year: What are these practices. What were the most successful and why?

Q2. What do you notice to have been the impact of these practices on students (behaviour, learning, engagement)?

Q3. How has your approach to working with students changed (if at all)? Describe the change. How have your relationships with the students changed (if at all) as a consequence?

Q4. How has your engagement in this project changed (if at all) your planning for lessons, units, programme. Has this project impacted on your assessment of students? If so how? If not, why do you think that is?

Q5. What does engaging student voice mean for you as a teacher?

Teachers’ Perceptions of Students

Q6. What have been the responses/reactions of students to your efforts? Behaviour, Ownership, Resistance, Puzzlement, Curiosity, Excitement? Can you provide some examples of these reactions?

Q7. Did you find students challenging you at times? Were there issues with relinquishing control?

Q8. What is your view of student engagement in Physical Education as a result of your efforts. Are they learning more, learning less, no change? Can you provide an example of what you mean from your observations in class?

Q9. Do you think students appreciated your efforts?

 Teachers’ Overall Perceptions of Student Voice

Q10. Has your vision for physical education as a subject (and for what a physically educated student is) been influenced/changed by your engagement in this project? Can you describe how this has changed?

Q11. In what ways has this work challenged you, motivated you in terms of what your trying to do in PE?

Q12. What have been the key learnings from the project: about yourself, about the students, about teaching/teaching PE?

Q13. Have other teachers taken notice of your efforts?

Q14. Is engaging student voice a sustainable approach for you as a teacher?

Q15. The NCCA are pushing this pedagogical approach to be used by all teachers: What about the feasibility of this for you? Across the school? Challenges/Opportunities? What kind of supports would be needed? Would there be resistance? Where would you see the resistance coming from?
Appendix H: Teacher-Researcher Reflection Journal - Sample Entry

23/1/17 Journal Entry 10 – UCD Library

It’s a new year and the project is still running in all three schools. This alone, is a significant achievement. All three teachers have stayed true to their commitment to creating a culture of student voice in their classes. It’s exciting now to be going back to these schools and meeting the students for the first time since May. I’m excited and curious as to what they have to say about their classes. Equally, I want to hear their thoughts and ideas about what is different for them with this new approach. Is it challenging? Fair? Worthwhile? Pointless? Brilliant or what?

I think about my own class and how it’s dynamic has changed. Students have more autonomy and influence, something which I still find intimidating. Sometimes, I feel that students are overstepping the boundaries at times. But, isn’t that what I wanted? I’ve learned to be more open to ideas and suggestions. I’ve tried to take things on board about my approach that I would never have before. This has been both positive and negative. I know that by talking and listening to the students and I can help create a better classroom environment. On the other hand, the students have highlighted areas of my teacher that are sources of frustration for them. If I’m being honest, I know not all students are happy with the way classes are running. But then again, isn’t that to be expected? That’s why we’re trying to listen. Otherwise, listening or speaking wouldn’t be needed. Unlocking students’ voices means unlocking ‘warts and all’.

I do worry that students have asserted themselves over me at times. Our relationship is a two-way street, and this has translated across into the English classroom. There are times when I think students feel that I don’t know it all (Not that I think I should). Teachers are often guilty of misrepresenting themselves as the fountains of all knowledge, the one stop shop where students will find what they want. Maybe students are made to think that teachers know it all and they should hanging on our every word. It’s strange how accustomed and comfortable we are with being seen to be the information holders and guiders. Is this not pressurising and demanding on us? Sometimes when I ask students for their own ideas, they’re looking at me wondering why. This isn’t the norm. You’re supposed to know. You’re supposed to be the one telling me what to do. I’m vulnerable in their eyes. In ways, that’s not a bad thing. I’m human. I’m not any different to them. But this treads the line of respect and makes it difficult for me to assert myself when it’s necessary to maintain classroom management. This is something that’s being nurtured and developed. I shouldn’t be so annoyed that students are
pushing the boundaries, it’s what I wanted them to do. If anything, it’s me who has been reluctant to adapt and change with them. Students aren’t used to being actively responsible for creating their learning. Sometimes, it’s given to them as easy as dinner. So, me asking them to help me is something that they might be sceptical of.

In ways, this has challenged me to respond. I expect more of my students but, equally, they’re now expecting more of me. They’ve seen what I’m willing to do and how hard I’m willing to work on certain aspects of my teaching and class content that when they see me coasting or going back to basics, they’re left unimpressed. Watching them communicate more in class leaves me wondering are they being more constructive learners, or simply disruptive students.

That’s the frightening part of student voice. You’re not quite sure where it’s going to take you sometimes. As a teacher with a duty of care to the young people you work with it can be a risk. You risk being ridiculed. You’re not going to get it right every time. However, when you do, the rewards are there. Often, the rewards don’t come straight away, but you need to keep at it. If you don’t then you’re giving up - and your students will realise that too.