

## **The Potential for Empowerment and Transformation for Young People with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties Engaging in Student Voice Research**

Young people identified with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) represent some of the most marginalised students in school and are often the least empowered and listened to of their peers (Cefai and Cooper 2010). Little has been written about the inclusion of young people with SEBD in mainstream schools as a large number of studies focus on students with this identification in special schools. By listening to these students' expert insights on their own experiences; teachers and researchers may be in a better position to provide appropriate pedagogically and socially aware learning experiences to young people identified with SEBD. This is important as they are often misunderstood within schools, and their behaviours represent a communicative function.

This article discusses the research process, findings and implications of an in-depth student voice study conducted with a sample group of twenty young people with SEBD in one mainstream post-primary school within the Republic of Ireland (ROI). The objective of this research project was to gain an insight into the students' experiences of school through the lenses of both their participation in this study and any interventions that were generated through the process. The following three questions guided the research:

- What are the students' views on their experience of school?
- Does their experience of engagement with student voice encourage the participants to become active agents in transformative action to benefit their educational environment?
- What is the impact of this student voice process on the wider school community?

It was essential to the research process to determine if the experience of being listened to for the student participants was one of empowerment and if that subsequently encouraged them to make changes that would benefit their educational environment.

### **Student Voice**

Within the conceptual understanding of 'voice' underpinning this research, is the assumption of having a legitimate perspective and opinion, as well as an active role in decisions about educational policies and practice (Holdsworth 2000). Student voice work has

been acknowledged in the literature as an opportunity to empower students to participate meaningfully and collaboratively in improving their experience of school (Fielding 2004; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007). Within the context of this study, the concepts of student voice and empowerment are similarly linked such that an authentic engagement with the former should pursue and enable an experience of the latter in order to support a positive experience of education.

There have been many studies which elicit the perceptions of students in mainstream education; however, very few have focused on students identified with SEBD (Davies, 2005). This is in spite of evidence that the empowerment of students with SEBD can contribute to the resolution and prevention of some of the associated difficulties experienced by these students in school (Cefai and Cooper 2010).

### **Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties**

SEBD encompasses a broad spectrum of difficulties including: anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, neurosis, childhood psychosis, attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder. The scale of behaviours may present as internalising; shy, withdrawn and introverted through to externalising; hyperactive, disruptive and in some cases, aggressive. In the ROI, the Department of Education and Skills is responsible for allocating resources to support students with special educational needs (SEN) in accordance with the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. Compliant with legislation, there are fourteen categories of SEN which include Emotional Disturbance (ED) or Severe Emotional Disturbance (SED). Students with SEBD are allocated additional support in school under the ED/SED categorisation, but must be in receipt of psychological or psychiatric attention to qualify for this support. This distinction clearly focuses on the categories of ED and SED from the perspective of a medical 'within-child' deficit and also defines associated difficulties in terms of negative conduct and behaviour (Government of Ireland, 2005).

It has been argued in the literature that ignoring concerns related to extreme examples of challenging behaviour, disaffection and failure as experienced by some students identified with SEBD can lead to a higher cost to society in terms of reduced economic contribution in adult life and for some, of criminal activity and prison (Wearmouth 2004). Considering the potentially bleak prospects for young people with SEBD who may experience disaffection and minimal engagement with education, it is important to elicit the perspectives of these

students on their experience of the learning environment with a view to identifying supports that are needed to help combat social exclusion (Davies 2005; Wearmouth, 2004).

### **Paradigmatic Stance and Ethical Considerations**

The theoretical framework for this study is aligned to the transformative paradigm and as such, this research is positioned within an emancipatory framework of inclusion, voice and empowerment (Mertens 2010). The transformative paradigm is referred to as ‘critical theory et al.’ by Guba and Lincoln (2005) and ‘emancipatory’ by Lather (1992). Researchers who position themselves within this paradigm believe their research must contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants and researcher, as well as the institutions in which individuals work or live (Mertens 2010). The theoretical understanding and vision of ‘inclusion’ which influenced this study, is one that is transformative, emancipatory and empowering. A society and/or education system that aspires to be irrefutably inclusive should directly challenge marginalisation and marginalising behaviours, while affording opportunities for active citizenship and participation. This perspective and understanding of inclusion is about recognition and respect for difference, as well as actively engaging ‘voice’ to promote a positive experience of empowerment. Consistent with the emancipatory/transformative paradigm, it was integral to this study that it would precipitate change and subsequently inform a discussion to influence policy. For this reason, it is ‘research as praxis’ driven (Lather 1986) because the researcher intentionally assumed the role of an active participant in the process. This was in order to facilitate dialogue in the pursuit of ‘change’ with the co-researcher participants but also to negotiate practical opportunities to support the realisation of transformation within the school environment. Praxis-oriented research is described as ‘the critical and empowering roots of a research paradigm openly committed to critiquing the status quo and building a more just society’ (Lather 1986, p. 258).

Ethical considerations related to working with the student participants for this study were paramount to the research approach. These issues are relevant when engaging children and young people in most forms of research; however, they are particularly significant when working with children who may have a higher degree of vulnerability because of additional needs.

To accommodate regular accessibility, principals of post-primary, mainstream co-educational schools across three adjacent Irish counties were contacted and invited to participate in this study. Four post-primary level schools expressed initial interest in the study and subsequently, explanatory meetings were held with staff in each schools. The principal and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) of one of these schools indicated there were a large number of students who had been identified with SEBD who were at risk of educational and social exclusion enrolled at their educational setting. This school is an urban based, Catholic, co-educational, DEIS<sup>1</sup> post-primary school with a wide social and geographic catchment area, enrolling between 550 and 600 young people annually from families in the small town and the rural outskirts. The principal agreed that suggestions for change which might emerge through the research process from the students would be acknowledged and trialled where possible. This article focuses on the study situated in that school for which the pseudonym, ‘Hedgehill’ was chosen.

The principal and SENCO at Hedgehill selected students they believed might benefit from participating in the research because they had been identified with SEBD. The SENCO initiated contact by explanatory letter to parents/guardians of the students, inviting interest in participation. Following parental consent, preliminary individual meetings were held between the researcher and all of the student invitees to clarify the purpose of the research and answer any questions. Each student was asked to decide if they would like to become involved and if they did, to complete a consent form or compose their own. In total, twenty from an initial identification of twenty three students agreed to participate and it was explained to each that they had the right to withdraw at any point without explanation.

During data collection, if students indicated they had distressing or sensitive issues to discuss, they were listened to carefully and sympathetically, without offering advice, but contact was facilitated with their consent to appropriate agencies and supports with the cooperation of the School Guidance Counsellor (SGC). In addition to these considerations and also in line with ‘Children First-National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children’ (DHC 1999) students were advised that they could speak to the researcher in confidence, but if they indicated that they were in any kind of danger, I had a duty of care to report my concerns. Disclosure of sensitive issues was not incorporated in the data unless

---

<sup>1</sup> Designated disadvantaged status by the Department of Education and Skills within the ‘Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools’ (DEIS) Action Plan for Inclusion

explicit permission was given by the participants to do so. Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the anonymity of participants.

### **Research Design**

A combination of narrative and ethnographic approaches were used to qualitatively explore the student participants' experiences. The narrative approach is an opportunity to make visible and central, 'those whose voices have been erased from the landscape, and for those who have been silenced it offers the platform for them to speak in their own words about their experiences' (Clark et al. 1998, p.67). The ethnographic approach enabled the researcher to become a familiar figure to participants by spending as much time as possible in the school with the students engaged in the research process (Hammersley 2006). This was important to generate and present a detailed and contextualised picture of the experience and expert voice of the participants. Establishing an interactive relationship with the participants encouraged activity for the purpose of promoting motivation, self-esteem, empowerment and transformation and for that reason, the approach was more closely akin to that of 'critical ethnographer' (Mertens 2010).

As indicated in Table 1 below, this study spanned a period of three years across two phases. Phase 1 was the period of data collection with all of the student participants while phase 2 involved consulting a voluntary advisory group from the initial cohort on the analytic process of the data. In total, twenty students who had been identified with SEBD participated in this study. The participants were comprised of six females and fourteen males between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews and focus group meetings conducted in the school with the student participants were the primary research instruments used to collect data, which were supported by insights recorded in a fieldwork journal and contributions from school personnel. The principal, SENCO, SGC, and five teachers contributed observations to the research data at the beginning and end of the study. These contributions were used to elicit a response from the adults on the impact of the research process and changes instigated by the student participants on the culture of the school.

PHASE OF STUDY	Number of student participants	Timescale	Instruments used for data collection	Number of interviews conducted with student participants	Number of focus groups conducted with student participants
<b>1</b> <b>(2009/11)</b>	20	2 years	Interviews & Focus Groups	218	7
<b>2</b> <b>(2011/12)</b>	5	1 year	Interviews & Focus Groups	3	2

**Table 1. Summary of Research Design**

The students decided the level and pace of their contributions which impacted on the frequency of individual meetings and their participation in group activities. Data generated from this research were analysed by means of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Five of the participants volunteered to collaborate with the researcher in the second phase of the study which involved interpreting and analysing the data to avoid an ‘*adulteration*’ or over-adult interpretation of same (Cruddas 2007, Flynn 2013).

### **The Process**

This research project involved consulting the students on their experience of school and determining if their engagement with the student voice process might empower them to become active agents in transforming their educational environment (Fielding 2004). However, facilitating student voice does not as a consequence or in isolation generate a sense of empowerment on the part of participants. A significant element integral to this process was the sustained approach and commitment to ‘authentic listening’ which could only be realised through acknowledgement and response to the views expressed and suggestions made by the students.

The pattern and length of the semi-structured interviews varied as determined by the individual participants. Depending on the experiences of the day or events leading up to that time, sometimes students were unresponsive and unwilling to talk, and on other occasions, anxious or happy to chat. The length of interviews conducted during the research process

ranged from a minimum of five minutes to maximum of thirty four minutes. Focus groups comprised of volunteers amongst the student participants were facilitated to expand on insights and ideas that emerged from individual interviews and to encourage group collaboration in suggesting student-led strategies and interventions to promote positive change in the students' experience of school.

After four months of intensive data collection, a number of emergent strategies were trialled within the school following a student-led group discussion with the school principal and a representative group of teachers:

- A Positive Aims Diary designed by the students, entitled *My PAD*, which incorporates contractual language in the 'voice' of the young people to their teachers; asking them 'to observe them' achieve their goals and 'notice' when they are successful
- A mentoring programme between senior and junior cycle students identified with SEBD
- Team building workshops with their respective class groups co-ordinated and organized by the participant students
- 'Chill Out' cards designed by the participants which permitted students to leave their classroom if they needed to calm down or felt very anxious

(Flynn, Shevlin and Lodge 2012, p. 256-7)

Before the end of phase one, all student participants were asked to contribute ideas and themes which were important to them from their experience of this engagement process and in response to questioning on their experience of school. This feedback, together with a compilation of data from transcripts and the reflective diary, was interpreted using a thematic- analysis staged-approach to identifying common themes and sub-themes across the data sets (Braun and Clarke 2006). A summary of the initial analysis of this study was submitted to a volunteer representative group from the participants in phase two of the study for their comments and clarification. Some changes were recommended by the participants, which were specifically related to emphases of importance within sub-themes. Consultation with the volunteer advisory group of participants was conducted through interviews and across two focus group sessions, with the final analysis approved by participants at the last meeting.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The four major themes which surfaced as significant to the participants were: ‘the importance of being heard’ (Rudduck and McIntyre 2003), ‘perspectives of difference’ (Holt 2004; Minow 1990), ‘relational care’ (Lynch and Baker 2005; Noddings 1992) and ‘leadership’ (Fielding 2004; Shevlin and Flynn 2011).

For many of the participants, the opportunity to talk and encountering an ‘authentic response’ influenced their levels of enthusiasm for and participation in the research process. Some of the most significant authentic responses emanated from students identifying supports and obstacles to their enjoyment of and engagement in school. As a result of highlighting important issues such as the quality of their relationships with teachers (Cefai and Cooper 2010) and their desire for respect, acknowledgment and to ‘be cared for and about’ (Lynch and Baker 2005); the focus of the research process was to encourage them to become active agents in orchestrating changes to bring about an improvement in their experience of school which culminated in some of the strategies that were suggested and/or designed by participants and outlined above.

There is a significant body of literature on the potential relationship between ‘voice’, ‘empowerment’ and/or ‘transformation’ (Fielding 2004; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007). Within this study, the potential of that relationship was also realised in the fact that most of the participants actively contributed to improving relationships with their teachers and peers, while promoting and participating in strategies and activities that impacted positively on their experience of school. However, for some of the young people who were ‘silenced’ on important issues in other parts of their lives, the experience of this voice process had less impact. It proved difficult to convince a young person that their opinions matter and that their voice can make an important contribution to a study like this if there are contradictions in what is happening around them. For example, one boy (Quincy) chose to have limited participation within this research which was not helped by the fact that most of the other student participants in his year group were together in one class and following a different certificate programme to him. Despite his inclusion in the research grouping, he remained apart from the other participants and although invited to become involved in a mentoring opportunity which emerged through the student voice process, he declined the opportunity. Quincy shared with me his frustration at the experience of feeling like he was ‘trapped in prison’ because he was constantly under scrutiny both in school and the residential care centre in which he was living during data collection (Quincy, March 2010).



Another participant, Eucharia, had a similar experience of being silenced when her subject choices and study programme were decided upon by her mother against her wishes. Consequently, she had less contact with the other research participants. It is regrettable that within a study which set out to empower students who were marginalised, two of the participants continued to be isolated, not just within the larger environment of the school but also within the smaller group. The physical distance from the rest of the group was undoubtedly a factor, however, their feelings of frustration and powerlessness relative to other circumstances in their lives seemed to impact on their willingness to take part or increase involvement in the research process.

'Perspectives of difference' (Minow 1990) were revealed to submit evidence of links between attitudes of teachers and internalised perceptions of self on the part of the students. Marginalised groups expose the lenses of normality through which they are unconsciously subscribed as different, and reveal what is implicit to the hidden curriculum of the school (Holt 2004). Although teachers and students may not intentionally reinforce negative perceptions of difference or reproduce notions of ability and disability, these are often unintended consequences of everyday practices associated with fulfilling the purposes of schools. Similar to Lynch and Lodge's research (2002), this study demonstrates that when young people with different abilities or emotional/behavioural difficulties are measured through lenses of 'normality', they can internalize negative attitudes of themselves, revealing their sense of inferiority relative to their peers and in their relationships with teachers. Participants acknowledged that an awareness of negative perceptions toward them can influence their behaviour and self-esteem; 'ya just know they think you're no good, so why disappoint them' (Harry, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2009); other students contributed similar comments, e.g.:

'I'm stupid'; 'everyone here expects me to be shite'; 'I'm rubbish at school, I'm going to fail'; 'Maybe I am a very bad person underneath?' 'Could you imagine me as a good example? It'll never happen'; 'I think a lot of teachers would prefer if I just left' (Flynn 2013, p. 208).

Three of the students with ADHD were very conscious of the negative perceptions of this condition and two of them blamed ADHD for characteristics in themselves that they did not like. One of these boys, however, came to transform his attitude when he experienced more positive relationships with his teachers and also because he became friendly with a boy who had dyslexia. He came to the conclusion that they were both just 'a bit different' and it really

wasn't 'a big deal' (Alex, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2010). However, the other boy personified ADHD to express his and others' perceptions of it:

When pushed to explain what he meant by 'people like me' he said "I don't just accept everything I'm told, sometimes I question things, that doesn't go down well. Add to that I have ADHD, teachers really hate that" (Peter, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2009). As he said this he made a cross with his two index fingers and started hissing; "Ooh ADHD, you vile creature" (Flynn 2013, p. 170).

Consistent with the students' views of how their teachers perceived them, some of the teachers' language confirmed negative perspectives when talking about their students (Garner 2009). Examples of comments made by teachers about specific participants include: 'the likes of him'; 'scum'; 'waste of space'; 'I'm sick of the sight of him'; 'brats'; 'thugs' (Flynn 2013, p.207). Although teachers are generally well disposed to the inclusion of students with special educational needs in their classrooms, attitudes may be different when they are confronted with 'difficult difference' (Rogers 2012; Shevlin, Winter and Flynn 2013).

'Care' emerged as one of the most important themes identified by the student participants across the data corpus. The language of caring prevails through early transcripts as students alleged their teachers or the school did not care about them. They also praised and acknowledged those people in their lives who *did* care about them. The significance of the theme was evident in their relationships with teachers and the impact of those relations on levels of confidence and their sense of comfort and well-being (Lynch and Baker 2005; Noddings 1992). Engagement in dialogue, in conjunction with experiencing praise, success and acknowledgement substantially improved relations between students and teachers.

The importance of 'attachment' and the need to 'belong' in school and amongst their peers also emerged within the theme of 'care'. This is similar to data from research conducted by Nind, Boorman and Clarke (2012) in a special school for girls identified with behavioural difficulties. The theme as it emerged from their study was the students' desire 'to belong' and to have 'some sort of attachment with people and places' (Nind et al. 2012, p.653). Likewise, most of the participants in Hedgehill enjoyed being part of the research group and the sense of identity and shared experience which this generated. One participant commented that 'Being part of this group...is a bit like being in a club. I've never been part of anything before' (Cassie, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2010).

Commenting on *My PAD*, which was the positive aims diary designed by the students, the SGC, Mr. Ash revealed that gradually, teachers realised that this strategy served to empower students to take responsibility for their behaviour and engagement because they were motivated by the fact that this intervention had been of their design. Teachers began to accept the strategy as symbolic of power-sharing rather than ‘power-over’ in addition to being an opportunity for praise and acknowledgement. This became more obvious because it was not just students who had previously been perceived as ‘troublesome’ who were presenting with *My PAD*, as he explained:

...this perhaps was when the realisation began to dawn on many teachers that it was actually not about behaviour exclusively. This penny dropped when shy or quiet students who were hardly noticed wanted to be acknowledged quietly for what they had always done without a drum roll in the classroom (Mr. Ash, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2011).

The theme of leadership is crucially linked to the other themes in this discussion and analysis. 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 and Flynn, 2011). The school principal is also responsible for fostering and encouraging learning for all students, including students who present with different learning abilities and needs. This is essential to the encouragement of a positive response to difference as well as recognising and encouraging all capabilities.

Within student voice work, it is important that students are not met with a tokenistic response because an experience of authentic listening has the potential to empower students to actively direct positive change in their school lives and to assume leadership roles in the process. Some of the unexpected outcomes of this study transpired from the leadership roles that were assumed by the student participants in response to a positive improvement in confidence levels. This emerged as a direct response to ‘being listened to’ and having the opportunity to direct and design strategies to improve their own individual experience of school as well as that of their peers (Rudduck and McIntyre 2007). Two of the participants explained the impact on them: ‘Just cos someone thought what I was saying was important like, made me think like I mattered and maybe I can do things that’ll mean something’ (Geraldine, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2010) ‘I think it’s about respect, except for some of me mates, I never felt anyone here ever respected me before this’ (Mark 7<sup>th</sup> May 2010). One of the most influential and enjoyable experiences as acknowledged by most of the participants, was their regular engagement within the mentoring partnerships. One participant who had taken on the role of a mentor to a boy two years younger described the experience:

Being a mentor was the biggest hugest change I could ever make in my life cos I never cared about anybody except myself but I couldn't believe that someone would trust me and I wanted to, you know, not let them down. It was great for me too (Peter, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2010).

However, a 'bottom up approach' such as this is redundant without an appropriate 'top down' response. This leadership relationship is multidirectional with the inherent possibility to promote relational care and, as a paradigm of leadership, is both empowering and reflective of itself. As a consequence of school leaders leading to encourage empowerment, the students become empowered to lead, generating a multidirectional model of empowerment, caring and leadership as a response to listening. The paradigm is premised on encouraging students through an engagement with voice to demonstrate their strengths and abilities and valuing them in the process. Respecting and acknowledging that students may know better how to help us help them, can promote a sense of ownership, responsibility and investment in positive behaviour and learning as evident from this study.

### **Implications**

This section revisits the guiding research questions to interrogate the implications of what was learned from the study.

- What are the student's views on their experience of school?

The participants made it very clear that they wanted to be listened to and that this was an important lesson which should be learned from the study.

The majority of students indicated that they had had difficult relationships with all or most of their teachers at the beginning of this study. When asked what needed to change in order to improve student-teacher relationships, many of the younger participants focussed on being acknowledged and praised for achievements, however small. One of the most frequent complaints amongst the participants was that they were only noticed if they did something 'wrong' or 'got into trouble'. Towards the end of the study, a number of the students volunteered that having a better relationship with even one or two teachers made a significant difference to their confidence and sense of comfort in school.

An issue that was prioritised across the students, however, related to teacher attitudes towards them especially when they were being disciplined. The general consensus amongst most of

the students was that they wanted to be respected but that negative attitudes towards them from their teachers contributed both to their negative opinions of themselves but also to frustration and episodes of challenging behaviour. Where relationships with teachers improved as a result of some of the emergent interventions and activities, the students conceded this also and shared that their overall experience of school had improved as a result.

Feeling ‘different’ within their school environment impacted on the students’ perception of themselves and how they were perceived by others. The student participants were very conscious of negative perceptions of challenges associated with SEBD and some of them had internalised these perceptions which was evident in their negative self-descriptions. Students also indicated that negative feelings about their abilities sometimes manifested into disruptive and challenging behaviour because students were angry, upset or stressed at feeling different. Some of the participants also shared that they would rather get into trouble for ‘bad’ behaviour than feel undermined because of ability in front of peers. However, four female participants shared their sense of poor self-image and esteem because they believed they were ‘invisible’ to teachers. They pointed out that some of their male peers got considerably more attention if they were badly behaved but the girls’ struggles with confidence and ability were overlooked. Other contributions included the importance of experiencing a sense of belonging in school and the fact that school can be a very lonely place if you feel different.

Many of the students demonstrated considerable insight in identifying supports and obstacles to their engagement in school. Although a lot of the obstacles emanated from a sense of frustration due to what they perceived as negative attitudes towards them or challenges as a result of different styles of learning, feedback from students and participants indicated that the dialogic consultation and the experience of being heard improved confidence, attitude and engagement in school. The emergent interventions and strategies from that consultation support Rudduck and McIntyre’s (2007) assertion that when students’ insights and opinions are taken seriously, they can experience a sense of ownership in their experience of school.

- Does their experience of engagement with student voice encourage the young participants to become active agents in transformative action to benefit their educational environment?

Engagement with this student voice initiative was unique to each individual involved, as evident from the different pace at which students contributed and the levels of involvement

and participation chosen by them. Having the opportunity to be heard was significant to all of the participants. However, as indicated, the experience of this voice process has less impact on young people who were silenced on important issues in other parts of their lives.

Nonetheless, the confirmation of the potential relationship between voice, empowerment and transformation was realised in the fact that most of the participants actively contributed to improving relationships with their teachers and peers, while promoting and participating in strategies and activities that impacted positively on their experience of school. Knowing that they were heard for some students was very powerful, as they had indicated at the beginning of the study that their opinions didn't matter or that nobody ever listened to them. It is significant that as they met a response which assured them that their opinions did in fact matter, most of the students were empowered to actively engage in, suggest or design interventions that contributed to transforming the culture of their school.

- What is the impact on the wider school community?

The impact of the students' active agency when they rose to the challenge of precipitating positive transformation to their school environment was realised throughout the school community. Evidence of this is embodied in the teachers whose attitudes towards the students became more positive and the acknowledgement by key personnel of the participants' impact on teachers and the school. Providing feedback at the conclusion of the study, the principal of Hedgehill commented that, as a result of the student voice study, the ethos and culture of the school had been changed to one that prioritised 'care' and 'listening'. She also pointed out that the most impressive outcome of the study 'was witnessing the leadership potential among students I had personally identified as exclusion risks' (Flynn 2013, p 221).

The most significant verification of the impact the student participants accomplished in transforming their school community has been in the combined efforts between staff, in particular the SENCO and SGC, with students, to sustain important aspects of the student voice initiative and strategies which emerged during the study. Their stated objective has been to maintain and encourage positive and caring relations, especially because 'care' had emerged as most significant to the participants throughout the data corpus. The manifestation of 'multidirectional leadership' has been essential to the preservation of listening to students at the school. Follow up visits to Hedgehill have confirmed the sustainability of the changed

ethos of the school to a stronger culture of caring which has generated further changes and strategies to involve more of the school community, including parents.

### **Concluding Comments**

This research, despite the evident limitation of being a small scale study, has important implications in the pursuit of methodologies to support students who are experiencing challenges in their educational environment. The process within which this research study was conducted, was critical to facilitating the authentic voice of the student participants.

The students who participated in this study were identified as presenting with internalising and externalising behaviours that were impinging on their social and/or educational development. Many of the students had been identified as exclusion risks by their school principal. Yet, students with labels that exemplify ‘difficult difference’ were responsible for positively affecting changes in attitudes towards them and presenting a model for the development of relationality in care and leadership. 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, Passeron and Nice, 1977), but rather, the expert voices of all young people in their own schools in the pursuit of inclusive education.

### **References**

- Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J. C. & Nice, R. (1977) *Reproduction in education, Society and Culture*, London: Sage Publications
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2) 77-101
- Cefai, C. & Cooper, P. (2010) Students Without Voices: The Unheard Accounts of Secondary School Students with Social, Emotional and Behaviour Difficulties, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25(2) 183-198
- Clark, C., Dyson, A. & Millward, A. (1998) *Theorising Special Education*, London: Routledge
- Cruddas, L. (2007) Engaged Voices - Dialogic Interaction and the Construction of Shared Social Meaning *Educational Action Research*, 15(3) 479 - 488

Davies, J. D. (2005) Voices from the Margins: Perceptions of Pupils with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties about their educational Experience, In Clough, P., Garner, P., Pardeck, J. T. & Yeun, F. (Eds.) *Handbook of Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, London: Sage

Department of Health and Children (DHC) (1999) *Children first: national guidelines for the protection and welfare of children*, Dublin: Stationery Office

Fielding, M. (2004) Transformative Approaches to Student Voice: Theoretical Underpinnings, Recalcitrant Realities, *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2) 295-311

Flynn, P. (2013) *Authentic Listening to Student Voice: The Transformative Potential to Empower Students with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties in Mainstream Education*, Dublin: TCD (unpublished thesis)

Flynn, P., Shevlin, M. & Lodge, A. (2012) Pupil Voice and participation: Empowering Children with Emotional and Behavioural difficulties, In Cole, T., Daniels, H. & Visser, J. (Eds.) *The Routledge International Companion to Emotional and Behaviour Difficulties*, Oxon: Routledge

Garner, P. (2009) *Special Educational Needs The Key Concepts*, London and New York: Routledge

Government of Ireland (2005) *DES Circular Sp Ed 02/05, Organisation of Teaching Resources for Pupils who need Additional Support in Mainstream Primary Schools*, Dublin: Department of Education

Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005) Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions and emerging confluences, In N. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Vol. 8, pp. 191 - 215) Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications

Hammersley, M. (2006) Ethnography: Problems and Prospects, *Ethnography and Education*, 1(1) 3-14

Holdsworth R. (2000) Schools that create real roles of value for young people *UNESCO International Prospect*, 30(3) 349-362

Holt, L. (2004) Childhood Disability and Ability: (Dis)ableist Geographies of Mainstream Primary Schools, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 24 (3)

Lather, P (1986) Research as Praxis, *Harvard Educational Review* 56 (3) 257-278

Lather, P. (1992) Post-Critical Pedagogies: A feminist Reading, In Luke, C. & Gore, J. M. (Eds.) *Feminism and Critical Pedagogy*, New York: Routledge

Lynch, K. & Baker, J. (2005) Equality in Education: The importance of Equality of Condition, *Theory and Research in Education*, 3(2) 131-164

Lynch, K. & Lodge, A. (2002) *Equality and Power in Schools: Redistribution, Recognition and Representation* London: RoutledgeFalmer



Mertens, D. M. (2010) *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods* (3rd Ed.), Los Angeles & London: SAGE

Minow, M. L. (1990) *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press

Nind, M., Boorman, G. & Clarke, G. (2012) Creating spaces to belong: Listening to the voice of girls with behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties through digital visual and narrative methods, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16 (7) 643-656

Noddings, N. (1992) *The challenge to care in the schools* New York: Teachers College Press

Rogers, C. (2012) Inclusive education, exclusion and difficult difference: a call for humanity? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33(3) 475-485

Rudduck, J. & McIntyre, D. (2007) *Improving Learning through Consulting Pupils*, London and New York: Routledge

Shevlin, M. & Flynn, P. (2011) School Leadership for Special Education Needs, In Sullivan, H. & West-Burham, J (Eds.), *Leading and Managing Schools*, London: Sage, Chapter 9, 126-140

Shevlin, M., Winter, E. & Flynn, P., (2013) Developing inclusive practice: teacher perceptions of opportunities and constraints in the Republic of Ireland, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17, (10), 2013, p1119 – 1133

Wearmouth, J., (2004) 'Talking Stones': An Interview Technique for Disaffected Students, *Pastoral Care in Education*, 22(2) 7-13