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Secondary School Girls Speaking Out on Their Rights to Have a Say in Schools

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Abstract:

Article 12 of the UNCRC, one of the four guiding principles of the Convention, states that children have the right to have an opinion, to express their views freely in all matters which affect them and to have their views heard. 'Participation rights' are often interpreted as 'student voice' in schools. Research has highlighted the positive impact of hearing the views of children and young people in schools. However, evidence suggests that young people continue to feel that they are not heard. Research also highlights the intersectional marginalisation of girls within the categories of women and children. However, there is very little research focusing specifically on girls' accessing their Article 12 participation rights and literature searches failed to find any in the New Zealand

context. This study explored female voice through the perceptions of girls in Years 9 – 13 attending schools around New Zealand. Semi-structured interviews gave voice to ten girls, providing the opportunity to discuss how well they felt they experienced participation rights. Findings highlighted a continuum of experience with only two out of the ten participants fully experiencing their Article 12 rights. All except one of the participants noted equality in participation rights, stating that gender inequality is a thing of the past. However, contradictions in these postfeminist narratives suggested the need for greater education on social and gender issues. Secondary findings indicated a breach of Article 42 of the Convention as there was little to no knowledge of the UNCRC.

Keywords: gender equity, female voice, student voice, participation rights, children's rights, UNCRC.

Introduction

The focus for this research is how well girls in New Zealand secondary schools are accessing their Article 12 participation rights as outlined within The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). The research also explores how female voice is perceived in New Zealand's schools and whether there are any gender differences in the 'right to be heard'. Article 12 of the UNCRC has been the subject of much debate as well as extensive research since the treaty was adopted in 1989 (Krappman, 2010). Commonly referred to as 'participation rights', Article 12 is one of the guiding principles of the Convention and the first clause states that:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

The UNCRC is a legally binding treaty which has been ratified by 195 countries around the world and was signed by New Zealand in 1993 (Osler, 1994). It is therefore the legal right for children within New Zealand to participate in the decisions which affect their lives and to express their views freely on the matters which are important to them (UNICEF, 2014).

In schools, children's participation is usually defined as 'student voice' and research has shown the wide benefits of ensuring students are heard. This includes the connection between student voice and their well-being as well as the development of respectful relationships between students and teachers (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2014; Roffey, 2015). Improvements in teaching, learning, attainment, and behaviour in schools can also be achieved through student voice where processes of open and honest dialogue are in place (Lodge, 2005). Furthermore, student voice is also likely to lead to learning which is more responsive to the needs of the students (Kennan et al., 2018).

Despite the research highlighting the positive impact of student voice, evidence suggests that children are often not listened to and student voice in schools is often narrowed and tokenistic (Lewars, 2010; Lundy, 2007). Evidence exploring power dynamics in schools also indicates that student voice is regulated and lacking authenticity (Ladkin, 2017; Nelson, 2017). Freeman (2009) argues that although participation is central to human rights and respects the autonomy of the child, there is a distinction between having this right and being allowed to exercise it, particularly as the 'age and maturity of the child' component of Article 12 means that adults decide whether participation is in the child's best interests. Tisdall (2017) highlights the concern that children's rights have not necessarily been taken into consideration when developing school councils; rather, they hold symbolic value and children are often not afforded genuine opportunities to impact decision making in schools. Freeman (2009) suggests that when judged against the Convention, children are being failed.

To address some of these concerns, there have been numerous proposals for enabling participation. However, recognising children as autonomous individuals has been a slow process and Lewars (2010) notes that many schools do not take the wider possibilities for student participation into consideration. There are also problems with tokenistic opportunities for engagement which indicates that children and young people are not being heard (Lundy, 2007). The impact of promising students a voice without listening to them can be highly damaging, leading to alienation and disconnection from schooling and is reflective of unequal power relationships in schools (Ladkin, 2017; Mitra, 2018).

Models of participation have been developed to provide adults with pathways for facilitating and recognising different forms of participation (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). Hart's (1992) ladder, for example, highlights the differing levels of participation with manipulation, decoration and tokenism at the bottom; consultation and information in the middle; and young person and adult shared decision-making at the higher levels. Bahou (2011) suggests the highest form of student voice work occurs when students and teachers work in partnership to achieve the former's goals, (i.e., the top rung of the ladder).

Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation attempts to capture the legal obligations within Article 12 by focusing on four separate but inter-related factors: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence. 'Space' indicates an adult's responsibility in creating opportunities for children to express their views, encourage their involvement and avoid solely adult initiated discussions or initiatives. 'Voice' highlights the need to find appropriate ways to involve children and enable them to express their views freely as indicated in Article 12. 'Audience' refers to the right within Article 12 for children to have their views given 'due weight'. This suggests that children must be listened to and involved in decision making processes. The final factor within Lundy's (2007) model is 'Influence' and the complexity of giving children's views due weight is considered. Lundy (2007) suggests that if children's views are to be taken seriously, then it is important for

adults to keep children informed as to how their views have been given consideration and to ensure feedback is given.

Female Voice

Despite the considerable attention which has been given to girls' achievements in education, research indicates that there are misconceptions of gender equality with clear disparities between post-feminist rhetoric and the realities faced by many girls (Osler & Vincent, 2003; Tyrie, 2013). The research by Pomerantz et al., (2013), for example, highlights girls who identify with 'girl power' narratives of feeling strong, and competent; mechanisms which are effective in creating positive feelings of empowerment. However, when faced with sexism in schools, these narratives can deny girls the opportunity to explain the sexism they face or take feminist action (Pomerantz, et al., 2013; Taft, 2004).

A similar view of marginalisation is embedded within Taefi's (2009) use of intersectional theory. This approach suggests that girls are marginalised within the categories of women and children and as a result they are denied their rights. Further to this, the experiences of girls in the developed world are often dismissed (Taefi, 2009). Tyrie (2013) also highlights the concern that there are misconceptions of gender equality. Through a large-scale mixed-methods study in Wales, Tyrie (2013) found numerous gender disparities including girls tending to have higher rates of depression, worrying more than boys and feeling more self-conscious. Boys tended to have higher self-esteem than girls and fewer issues with anxiety. While the data indicated no gender inequalities in the right to be heard as including girls out-performing boys academically, the perception was that teachers are sexist and reinforce gender norms.

The research indicates numerous gender inequalities. However, there is also evidence of strong female voice and leadership. This includes many young women in activism, making their voices heard in the matters of importance to them. In her book 'Rebel Girls – Youth Activism and Social Change Across the

Americas', Taft (2011) foregrounds girls who have forged activist identities with the desire to create change and make the world a better place through involvement in various kinds of action groups. These girls are empowered citizens who provide a contrast to ideas of youth apathy.

Malala Yousafzai is a notable example of a girl-activist coming to global prominence in 2012 after being shot by the Taliban for voicing her views on girls' right to education in Pakistan (Sadaf, 2017). For this activism, Malala has been awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought (2013), the Simone de Beauvoir Prize (2013), and she became the youngest ever Nobel Prize laureate in 2015 (Sadaf, 2017). Malala's role is undoubtedly one of active participation with a strong public image in Western media. Greta Thunberg is another example of a high-profile young female activist who rose to prominence after going on school strike in her home country of Sweden to raise awareness of the climate crisis. She was thrust further into the limelight following her speech at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in 2019 (Jung, et al., 2020). Sophie Handford has also played an important role as a youth environmental activist in New Zealand, making use of social media to draw together thousands of young people of varied ages and locations across New Zealand for the school climate change strikes in March 2019. The New Zealand Sustainable Development Report (2019) described Sophie's activism as reflective of many youth movements which focused on empowering and including individuals. Importantly, the strikes gave a voice to many young people concerned about the future of the planet.

In contrast there have also been polarised reactions to adolescent female leaders in the media. Greta Thunberg's presentation in social media has been analysed by Jung et al. (2020) noting that Twitter users criticised Greta in relation to her gender, ethnicity or age with attempts to belittle her with comments such as 'little girl' and 'child' (Jung et al, 2020, p. 6). At the other extreme, Greta has been supported for being inspirational and brave. Media responses to Malala have also revealed polarised views praising her bravery on the one hand but on

the other, there have been suggestions that she has been exploited as a tool for political propaganda (Ryder, 2015).

Eckert (2014) notes that adolescents and women often experience the trivialisation of their concerns. Taft (2011) also highlights the problematic intersection of age and gender with the girls she interviewed commenting on their experience of sexism and not being taken seriously as activists. These concerns are reflected by Switzer et al. (2016) who note that whilst girls may appear hypervisible, they also hold a precarious position as rights holders, suspended between women's rights and children's rights agendas, effectively negating their visibility.

Research has therefore emphasised the importance of gender equality education. Archard (2013) focuses on the importance of encouraging female leadership with recommendations for providing adolescent girls with a broad range of leadership opportunities which should incorporate communication, interpersonal skills, and critical reflection. As well as this, Archard (2013) suggests that developing their understanding of gender issues and increasing their social awareness will help prepare them for their futures. Farvid's (2017) research focuses on gender inequality in New Zealand in terms of issues such as gender-based violence, the gender pay gap, and the lack of women in leadership and highly paid executive positions. She highlights the need for gender equality education as a way of addressing these broad societal issues of gender inequality.

Background and Rationale

A review of the literature highlighted sparse research specifically into the effects of gender on access to participation rights in schools and searches found no literature on this subject in the New Zealand context. The majority of literature tended to focus on the ways in which girls can be marginalised. Taefi (2009), for

example, focused on girls being denied access to their rights due to their intersectional marginalisation as both women and children with issues of gender inequality for girls in the developed world often being ignored. There are, of course, many high-profile girls expressing the views which are important to them but, as already stated, they can experience polarised views in the media (Jung et al., 2020). The literature also highlighted concerns surrounding dominant postfeminist discourses. These narratives may empower girls on the surface with narratives of equality, strength, power, and success. Ironically, the narrative of gender inequality being a thing of the past removes the power for girls to be active in pointing out sexism and does not provide girls with the language to discuss gender disparities (Pomerantz et al., 2013).

Tyrie's (2013) broad focus on gender and the rights of children and young people in Wales was the most closely related to the topic for this research, highlighting young people's perceptions of teachers as sexist, as well as an indication of many other gender disparities. Whilst Tyrie (2013) did not find any inequalities in the right to be heard, the research concluded by stating the need for continued work and broad societal changes in the area of gender equality.

The following research questions were therefore selected to address the gaps and limited literature in this area: (i) In what ways are female voices heard in New Zealand's secondary schools? (ii) How is female voice perceived in New Zealand's secondary schools? and (iii) How are female voices heard in comparison to male voices in New Zealand's secondary schools?

Methodology and Methods

The Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology was chosen for this research with interpretivist epistemological assumptions which support the importance of giving voice to the participants, remaining grounded in their views, experiences and perceptions. The focus within CGT is gaining insight into the

participants' lived experiences as well as interpreting how participants construct their realities (Breckenridge et al., 2012). This approach therefore enabled an understanding of how the ten girls within the study experienced their UNCRC right to participate as well as their perceptions on issues of gender.

The sample consisted of ten female students from Years 9–13 (13–17 year olds) across a range of secondary schools. Six participants attended girls' schools and four participants attended co-educational schools.

Volunteer sampling was used to recruit the first two participants. Both girls were Year 10 students attending a co-educational school and highlighted differing perceptions of participation. The next three participants were recruited using a theoretical sampling approach. They were all in Year 10 of a girls' school and were members of the school's Amnesty International group. This provided an opportunity to direct the data collection with girls who were active in student voice initiatives. The next set of participants were recruited following an advertisement placed on the researcher's Facebook page, a Year 9 girl attending a girls' school, a Year 11 girl attending a coeducational school and three Year 13 girls, two from girls' schools and another girl attending a coeducational school. Given the wide variety of contexts and ages of the participants, the interviews provided opportunity hear a range of views, an important component of the CGT methodology. Following the ten interviews, no new codes or categories emerged leading to theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interviewing process was chosen for this research with the aim to produce an inductively driven theory grounded in the data. The process involved constant comparative actions to develop the categories and codes which formed the grounded theory. As well as coding the data, the grounded theory process includes writing memos whilst gathering the data, and a purposive or 'theoretical' sampling approach to direct the data collection to gain

varied perspectives and “as full a picture as possible” (Charmaz, 2006, p18). This is done until theory saturation is achieved, (i.e., when no new categories have arisen from the data collection).

The two face-to-face interviews were recorded using a voice recording application on the researcher’s phone. The remaining interviews were recorded on Zoom video conferencing due to the need for social distancing under Covid19 restrictions. All recordings were stored on a password protected device and deleted at the close of the research. Pseudonyms were used and identifying information such as school names were removed during transcription. The researcher transcribed these interviews, allowing for full immersion and a deeper understanding of the data. The coding process followed immediately. The initial coding focused on defining what the data was about by categorising, summarising and analysing each section of data (Charmaz, 2006). The coding was done by hand using a line-by-line approach to name each segment of data and understand the participants’ views without imposing pre-existing ideas onto the data.

Focused coding was the next stage in the process and involved a close analysis of the emerging core categories. This involved reviewing, refining and drawing together codes to form more abstract concepts and categories (Chun Tie et al., 2019). The final theoretical coding stage followed this, and the researcher integrated the codes by exploring the relationships between concepts, data, and the emerging over-arching conceptual categories.

Results

Three core categories were developed to form the constructivist grounded theory: ‘Space and Freedom to have a Voice’; ‘Importance of Being Listened to and Taken Seriously’ and ‘Female Construction of Participation’. As noted in the figure 1 diagram, the categories were developed in line with Lundy’s (2007) Model of Participation which captures the legal ramifications of Article 12 within

four key components: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence. As noted by Krappmann (2010) the right to participate is often viewed as the most important characteristic of the UNCRC which is reflected in Article 12 having overarching status on the diagram.

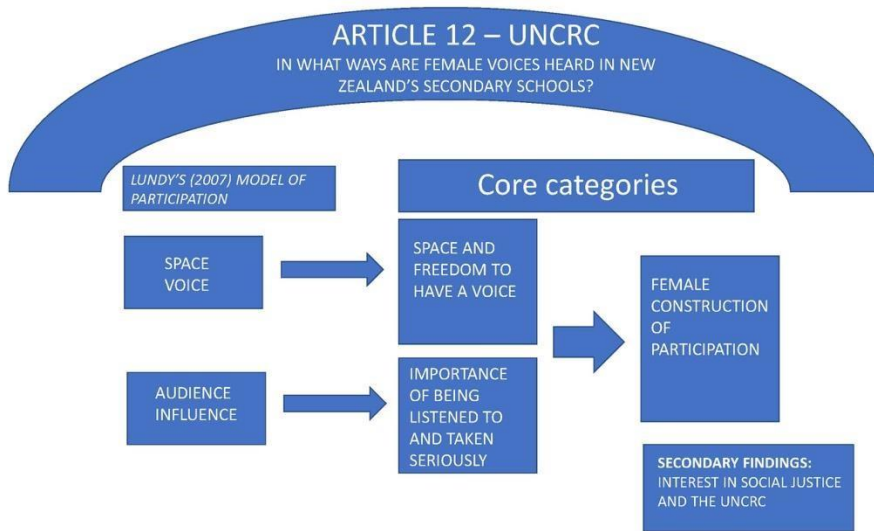


Figure 1 Overview of findings and the connection with Lundy's (2007) model of participation

A continuum of participation, reflective of Hart's (1992) ladder of participation (figure 2) was also developed, indicating the varying levels of participation identified by the participants. These ranging from tokenism through to empowerment, agency and influence.

Continuum of Participation

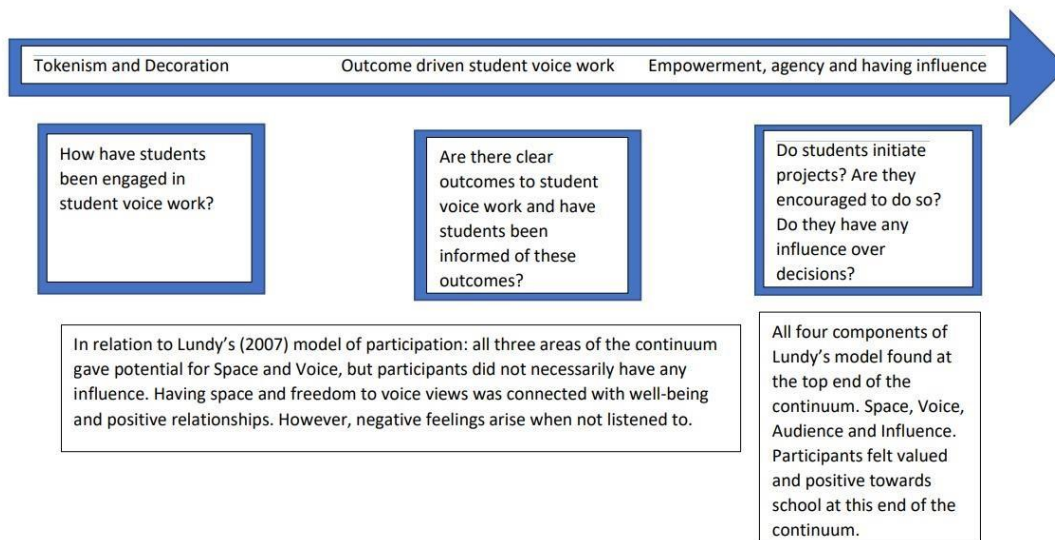


Figure 2 Continuum of participation

Space and freedom to have a voice

In line with the 'Space' and 'Voice' components of Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation, this category reflects the opportunities for students to express their views and understand how well this had been facilitated.

Relationships with both teachers and peers was noted as an essential component in the feeling of being heard with this view consistent across all participants. Surekha (Year 10), for example, stated: "I'm pretty good at voicing my opinions especially like if I'm with like friends." Comparative with many other participants, Surekha's comment reflects the sense of being empowered and confident in expressing her views, particularly with the support of her peers. Zara (Year 13), however, highlights the more negative impact that peers can have on student voice. For example, she noted that the fear of receiving "hate" on social media can silence students.

The power of teachers to either regulate student voice or empower students at either end of the continuum was also a predominant factor in the participants feelings of being heard. Philippa (Year 13), for example, felt leadership and participation was actively encouraged: “any year group can kind of start anything they want” highlighting empowerment and having influence in her school. However, Hannah (Year 11) felt like there was a lack of mutual respect between teachers and students: “...they kind of don't pay the respect back to me” and commented that she did not have any genuine influence in her school.

Importance of Being Listened to and Taken Seriously

This category is in line with the ‘audience’ and ‘influence’ components of Lundy’s (2007) Model of Participation and links to how well the participants felt they were listened to in their schools and whether their views acted upon. The views of the participants also align with a continuum of participation with two participants who provided examples of their views being given due weight at the empowerment, agency and influence end of the continuum. The remaining eight participants felt that they had very little influence.

Tokenistic engagement was highlighted in the comments made by seven of the participants. Sarah (Year 13), for example, spoke passionately about the problems of her school’s “constricting” uniform as well as unequal treatment between boys and girls but she could choose the “song for house singing” and the “costumes for fashion show”. Amelia (Year 10) noted being part of an environmental group where she could “talk about different ideas” however, there were no clear outcomes suggesting a lack of influence or being taken seriously.

There was a clear connection between allowing students influence and their positive feelings towards school as well as their sense of well-being. For

Philippa, this related to being able to “make change in the school”. For Bethany, it was the feeling of being heard: “every single time I have had an issue, they have listened.”

However, the negative impact of not listening to students was a sense of disconnection and being made to feel like “we didn’t matter” (Kate). Zara reflected a feeling of resignation that the teachers in her school felt students were “not mature enough to have a voice.”

Female Construction of Participation

Active participation was a key feature of this category. The entirely female sample highlighted the ways they use their voices to develop their identity, particularly in relation to active participation. For Zara, it was important for her to “educate” others by highlighting important issues on social media. Eight of the participants referred to the importance of using voice and participation to ‘make a difference’ as exemplified by Surekha: “We’re Gen Z. We want change; we want equal rights for everyone.”

Nine participants stated that there were no gender inequalities in the right to be heard as characterised by Bethany: “I actually think it’s pretty equal at our school. We have a Head Boy and a Head Girl, and they are both equal.” There were some exceptions to this view, reflecting the continuum of experience, most notably, Sarah’s comments on sexism in her school; the perception from another participant that boys can dominate in the classroom; and Surekha’s view that stereotypes of girls and women still exist: “stereotypes against women, misogyny.” However, generally the feeling was of gender injustice being irrelevant.

In contrast, gender inequality was highlighted by Sarah who commented on the roles of Head Boy and Head Girl in her school: “he’s got more of a profile and more of a show at the front” but the Head Girl does “most of the work”. Her perception was of an oppressive and unequal distribution of power: “...she’s,

she's backing him with his decisions and getting it done, like, he'll, he'll say something and she'll do it, you know. Yeah, I feel like that's more of the relationship.”

Empowerment was drawn from sources such as positive perceptions of female voice and leaders. For example, Surekha stated: “I've seen a lot of changes with Jacinda Ardern and, like, it's empowering more females to go into that type of career as well, like a trail blazer.”

Hannah's comments reflect the views of most participants with the opinion that there are no longer any gender inequalities: “it doesn't matter if you're a male or female... I don't really think that we care about what gender it is.”

Perceptions of female voice were generally positive with comments such as “powerful”, “strong”, and “inspiring” in relation to prominent female leaders. However, Sarah felt that Greta Thunberg might be perceived as a “joke” by some boys. When Bryony was asked whether perceptions would be similar or different for a boy, she commented that female voice stands out more in the media because it is “not as common”. Of course, this raises the question as to why this may be perceived as something more unusual and reflects the othering of female voice. Even Hannah who dismissed the idea of gender inequality, stated that Greta is “complaining rather than...taking action”, a less than positive view of a young female voice.

Secondary Findings

It was clear that none of the participants had been taught about the Convention in any kind of comprehensive way despite Article 42 of the UNCRC stipulating that State parties should be ensuring wide knowledge of the Convention:

State Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike. (UN General Assembly, 1989)

Discussion

Utilising a Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, the overarching but interlinked categories were developed by aligning the participants' experience and views of participation in their schools to Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation. 'Space and Freedom to have a Voice' was connected to 'space' to be able to voice opinions and 'voice' to be facilitated to express views (Lundy, 2007). 'Importance of Being Listened to and Taken Seriously' was connected to 'audience' and 'influence': to be listened to and have their views acted upon as appropriate (Lundy, 2007). 'Female Construction of Participation' reflected the female participants views on gender and participation and their preferences for participation. All three categories are linked to Article 12 of the UNCRC as they all reflect how the participants are heard. This discussion will focus on responding to the core research questions.

In what ways are female voices heard in New Zealand's secondary schools?

For the participants in this study, their voices were heard in varied ways in their schools. This is represented as a continuum of participation and experience with participants responses reflecting tokenistic roles whilst others felt they had agency and were empowered in their participation.

Within the 'Space and Freedom to have a Voice' category, the participants identified the importance of their relationships with teachers. Some participants shared concerns about the lack of mutually respectful relationships between students and teachers. This finding is reflected in the literature relating to power dynamics in schools. Lundy (2007) notes that some teachers have concerns about participation and how it might destabilise the school environment as well as affect teacher authority and control. Ladkin (2017) also highlights issues relating

to unequal power relationships within New Zealand's schools and suggests that hidden power structures can affect the authenticity of student voice.

Relationships with peers was also raised as an important feature of participation for the young women in this study. Being able to collaborate, discuss and have the support of peers enabled confidence to express an opinion, resulting in meaningful participation. Whilst this is not a finding reflected widely in the literature, Ladkin (2017) highlights the importance of building students' identities and supporting discussion between peers to build a more democratic environment which can help to diminish power imbalances. Lundy (2007) also notes the importance of having safe spaces for students to express their views.

Through the conceptual category: 'Importance of Being Listened to and Taken Seriously', the participants' comments highlighted the thin veneer of democracy provided by student voice initiatives (Mitra, 2008). Seven of the participants commented on teachers or senior managers not being genuinely interested in listening. This is likely to be because participation is often adult initiated and of little interest to most young people (Head, 2011; Lundy, 2007).

How is female voice perceived in New Zealand's secondary schools?

This question was addressed through the conceptual category: 'Female Construction of Participation'. The participants indicated the view that female voice is perceived positively, stating that women and girls are empowered to have a voice and to express their opinions. There were also feelings that strong female leaders in the media were inspiring and added to their sense of empowerment. This is a view reflected in the research by Archard (2013) who advocates for greater education into how female leaders contribute to society as well as the need to deconstruct gender roles. Archard (2013) notes that learning about female leaders is a motivational tool for young women and encourages them to take on leadership opportunities within their schools. The participants certainly reflected this with positive views of Jacinda Ardern, Chloe Swarbrick and

Alexandria Cortez amongst others. They also stated that it is important to have leadership opportunities in their schools.

However, there were some contradictions to this view suggesting that female voice can also be perceived negatively. Taft (2011) notes young female activists can experience sexism with adults not taking their activism seriously. Zara, for example, felt that being young was a barrier to being listened to. The participants also commented on stereotypes of women and female leaders in the media. The conversation, for example, turned to perceptions of Greta Thunberg being perceived as “grumpy”, “a joke” to boys, and “just complaining”. Eckert (2014) suggests that age-related ideology and gender-ideology are inseparable, as well as noting that women and adolescents share the trivialisation of their activities and concerns.

Despite some of these negative perceptions, it was clear that the participants wanted to be perceived as active, engaged and empowered in their participation. They want to make a difference, speak out, voice opinions on global movements and share messages on social media, as well as “educate” others. These factors were identified as important features of the way that the girls in this study wanted to participate.

How are female voices heard in comparison to male voices in New Zealand’s secondary schools?

This question was also addressed within the conceptual category: ‘Female Construction of Participation’ and allowed for an exploration of participants’ views on their right to be heard as well as their perceptions of gender issues.

The broad view was that there are no gender inequalities in the right to be heard. Four participants commented on issues of sexism in general. However, overall, the participants comments reflected a sense of strong female voice and empowerment. These views are in line with post-feminist narratives which centre around inequality being a thing of the past and girls feeling strong, and competent (Pomerantz et al., 2013). As a mechanism, Pomerantz et al. (2013)

suggests that post-feminism can be effective in creating positive feelings of empowerment, but this discourse can also be unstable as these narratives do not provide a way of explaining sexism or inequality. This view is supported in the inconsistencies or unstable statements highlighted by the participants in this study. They recognised broad issues of sexism in society and misogynistic stereotypes but did not necessarily feel that these were issues which affected them. The overwhelming view was that participation rights were equal and yet one participant stated that boys can dominate in the classroom and this might affect the way that girls speak out in class. Contradictions also arose in some of Sarah's statements which reflected sexism, particularly the perception that boys were given a higher profile in her school than girls, and yet collectively, she felt the girls in her school had strong voices and could make themselves heard. Farvid (2017) suggests that schools need to embrace gender equality education and support greater critical thinking in relation to gender. This would help to address some of these contradictions, debunk some of the gender myths and ensure greater flexibility and inclusivity (Farvid, 2017).

The participants in this study had limited knowledge of the UNCRC and in some cases had never heard of the Convention. There was certainly no indication of any kind of comprehensive human rights education which is in breach of Article 42 of the UNCRC whereby the principles and provisions of the Convention should be widely known (Mitchell, 2005).

Implications of this Research

All participants were aware of student voice initiatives within their schools which supports the Article 12 rights of children and young people. However, there were questions around how effective these initiatives were and concerns were raised in relation to power imbalances. Reflecting current literature, the participants expressed ways that these imbalances could be addressed to elicit more authentic views from the students, for example, through peer collaboration and allowing students the opportunity to 'make a difference' through active

participation. There is also much that can be learnt from the two participants who experienced their Article 12 rights in full through all four components of Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence.

Foregrounded in their comments was the importance of respectful partnerships between teachers and students.

Research suggests that setting up dialogue between students and teachers should help to diminish powerful/powerless binaries and the view that student voice is a challenge to teacher authority (Cairns, 2001; Lundy, 2007). It was therefore important to provide opportunities at the higher rungs of Hart's (1992) ladder of participation which the participants identified as the opportunity for open discussions, the chance to develop leadership skills, be active participants and have influence. These leadership skills may be developed in a variety of contexts, not just formal student councils and can therefore incorporate students who may not typically fit the profile of a council member (Head, 2011). Examples given included joining groups such as Amnesty International and a female empowerment group in one school. This view is reflected in Archard's (2013) recommendations for girls to experience both formal and informal opportunities for leadership.

Improving communication with students about the outcomes of student voice as well as ensuring purposeful participation is also important in avoiding tokenism, something which the participants identified as a major problem (Hinton, 2008). The literature was reflective of the participants views on how they wanted to enact their Article 12 rights. This included allowing students to influence their own learning (Ladkin, 2017); develop active strategies of participation such as leading groups and providing opportunities for girls to make a difference (Archard, 2013; Taft, 2011). Additionally, acting on ideas of importance to them to create positive feelings towards school and a sense of well-being was also highlighted (Roffey, 2015). In line with the research by Farvid (2017), the findings demonstrate the need for a comprehensive programme of gender education.

Archard (2013) and Pomerantz et al. (2013), support this view and promote the need to increase students' understanding of social and gender issues. Education of these issues will allow students to recognise and label gender injustice which dominant post-feminist discourses fail to do.

Conclusion

The findings within this study demonstrate the relational nature of Article 12; it is one thing for children to be able to express a view, but adults also need to listen and give those views due weight. The participants' comments reflected this, recognising the importance of positive relationships with both teachers and peers in realising their participation rights. A key implication for this finding is therefore to base participation around dialogue rather than powerful/powerless consultations to enable young people to not only voice their opinions but to also be taken seriously (Bahou, 2011; Cairns, 2001; Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2008; Roffey, 2015). Furthermore, understanding girls' preferences for active participation as well as the need to provide education of gender and social issues was an important finding of this study as was the need to recognise their changing capacities and capabilities (Archard, 2013; Farvid, 2017; Pomerantz et al., 2013).

The importance of ensuring full participation rights in schools is reflected in the words of one of the participants: "Knowing that your voice is being heard is like making it seem like you matter".

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