



Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University

# Activating learners' voices: Listening, learning and leadership



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# DCU Institute of Education



# OVERVIEW

## ► **Learners' Voices!**

- Whose voices, and why listen?
- International and Irish research evidence and rationale for LV engagement

## ► **Listening, learning and leadership**

- What have we learned from listening and consultation in the Irish education context?
- Findings, implications and conclusions with respect NCCA Learner Voice Study ([NCCA publication, 2017](#))
- Relationship between 'voice', 'transformative dialogue' and 'leadership'

## ► **The dialogic education environment: Activating Learners' Voices & the Learner Voice Space**

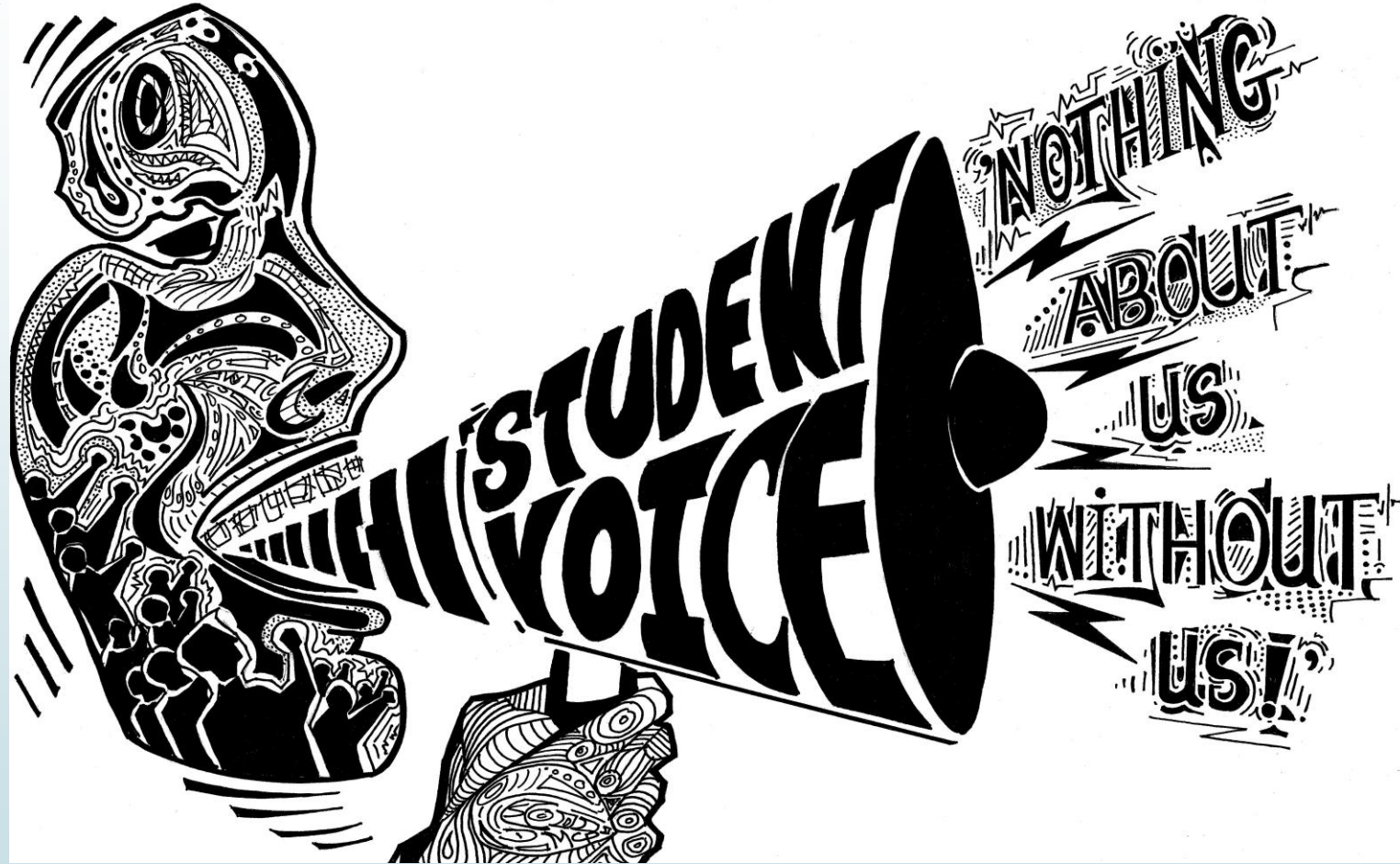
- What is your role? Which learner.....?

# Voice?

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- ❑ What does it mean to 'have a voice/say'?
- ❑ My opinion is valued and respected, I am present and active in the decision making process. **If I have been heard, I know this....**(Flynn, 2019 forthcoming)

# Voice?



With grateful thanks to Darren Byrne, Sarah Dempsey and Darren Causland, St Joseph's Secondary School, Rush

**‘In the acoustic of the  
school, whose voice gets  
listened to?’**

(Arnot et al. 2001)

# Whose voices, why listen?

Irish based research and practice:

- Students identified with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (2008-2012)
- NAPD: student led research – trust, relationships, inclusion, relevance of the student council (2012-2013)
- NCCA: curricular co-construction and development (2014-2017)
- SCoTENS: teachers' beliefs about education and children's voice practices on the island of Ireland (collaboration with QUB, 2015-2018)
- Supporting schools in preparation for and evaluation of change within a model of 'learner voice and theory of change' (Flynn and King 2018-2020)

# Whose voices, why listen?

- Consultation and participation for learners encourages **learner engagement in learning, empowerment and student agency**
- Accessing learner perspectives on school problems and possible solutions reminds teachers and administrators that **children and teenagers possess unique knowledge and insights**
- Informed by learner insights on their experience of supports and obstacles to learning – there is potential to facilitate **leadership, ownership and responsibility** with respect to engagement and learning

# Inclusive education....a strategy for all children!

- **Reduced self esteem and low motivation** in children with learning difficulties (DES 2007, Heyman 1990, Smyth 2015, ValÅs 1999)
- Facilitating LV has the potential to **improve teacher-student relationships** and quality of school life for students (Davies 2005; Tangen 2009)
- Centrality of learner-teacher relationships and the classroom climate as **crucial influences on children's self image and wellbeing** (Smyth 2015)
- Significance of **links between student voice, relationships, attachment (connectedness/belonging) and impact on positive sense of wellbeing** (Anderson & Ronson 2004; ERO 2015; Flynn 2014 & 2015; Simmons, Graham and Thomas, 2015)



# No limits!

- Beyond ascertaining perspectives from young people - move towards a **more democratic process** of shared curricular development and co-construction as well as a **collective responsibility** for developing solutions in education environments (Bovill et al. 2011; Cook-Sather 2002; Fielding 2015; Shirley 2015).
- When student voice is linked to changing curriculum and instruction – impact on learning and **greater understanding of how they learn, stronger sense of own abilities** (Flynn, 2017; Mitra 2003; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000)

# United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989

- **Article 12** - the right to express their views in matters affecting them and have their opinions given due weight commensurate with age and maturity
- ...appearing to listen to children is relatively unchallenging; giving due weight to their views requires real change. Listening to children should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means by which States make their interactions with children and their actions on behalf of children ever more sensitive to the implementation of children's rights (UN Committee 2003, p.4)

# Authentic versus Tokenistic Listening

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- (Lundy, 2007)
  - easy for adults to comply with outward signs of consultation and ultimately ignore children's views - tokenistic or decorative participation is not only in breach of Article 12 but can be counter-productive
- (Flynn, 2013)
  - "When pupils are consulted seriously, it can make them feel, often for the first time, that their school and their class are to some extent **their** school and **their** class – impact on sense of belonging and attachment"
  - "Through consultation, we may deepen our understanding of marginalised groups"

# Hard to reach learners

- Disaffection
  - Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties
  - Additional needs
- 
- A student who presents with internalising behaviours; for example, if they are shy, reticent, withdrawn, nervous, or anxious, is at risk of being ignored or rendered 'invisible'. The 'quiet child' is easily overlooked and vulnerable to internalising very low levels of self esteem which can be exacerbated if their needs are ignored (Collins, 1996)
  - Students with SEBD 'are usually the least listened to, empowered and liked group' (Cefai and Cooper, 2010:4) Evidence that empowerment of students with SEBD can contribute to the resolution and prevention of some of the associated difficulties experienced by these students in school (Kroeger et al. 2004; Cefai & Cooper 2010)
  - And yet, 'it is somewhat paradoxical that those pupils, who literally, often speak or shout loudest in the classroom, are those whose voices are most seldom heard' (Tangen, 2009:841).



'Why we want to participate in this student voice study'

I'm Invisible

I want somebody to listen to me and not just think I'm always wrong

I know I can help other people like me if you give me a chance

I 'm very unhappy and I hate school every day

I want to do I ME cuz I want to talk about school and why it makes me crazy

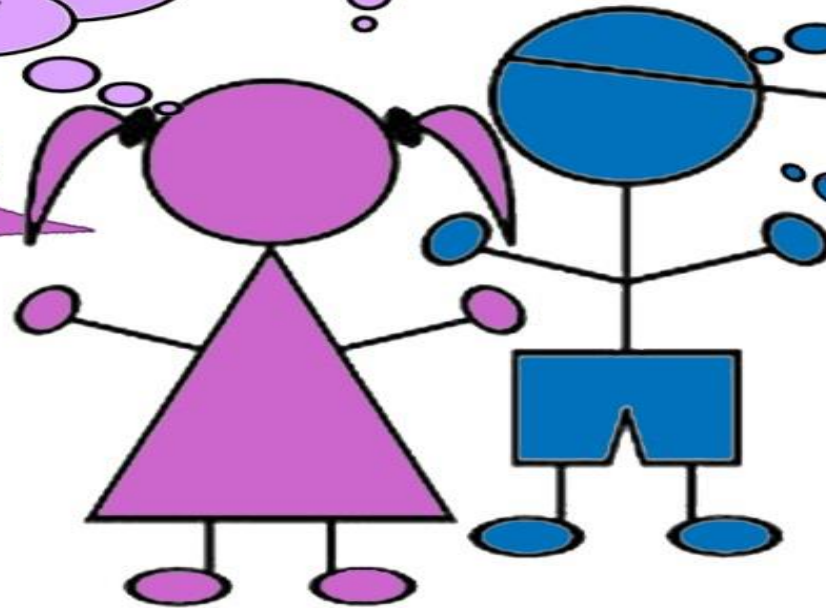
People get in me face over stupid things like runners and stuff but they have no clue what's really important

Teachers tell me I'm no good an' I know that's true but maybe this I'm ME thing will help somebody

I think if you listen to me and other kids here you'll learn what'll help other kids how to not feel like their rubbish

I 'll do it but I dont know why you want to talk to me, no 1 ever asks me nothing

Yeah if I can get out of some of me classes and you don't make me do homework



# LISTENING, LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP...

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- **Internalised perspectives of difference**
  - **Positive impact on student/teacher relationships** – significance for positive well-being (Flynn 2015, Smyth 2015)
  - **Attachment and identity to school – connectedness and belonging**
  - **Relational Care**
  - **Power sharing does not undermine authority – encourages responsibility and ownership**
  - **Leadership Potential**
    - Bottom up approach
    - Top down response
- “For me the most impressive outcome of the programme was witnessing the leadership potential among pupils I had personally identified as exclusion risks” (School Principal)

## Three year Irish study – 20 schools and more than 350 students

1. To facilitate a process of student consultation on the development of new junior cycle curriculum specifications
2. To determine *how* to include student voice in education discourse for participating schools and the NCCA such that there is:
  - an embedded culture of listening
  - a strategy to support a sustainable structure and response to student voices.

# Some shared learning from the experience....

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- Expertise and value of shared expertise & experience for all participants
- Positive impact on 'being heard'; 'this is a privilege'; 'I feel stronger, I can make a difference'; self confidence and sense of value; 'I feel more important in my school, like I have a purpose and can leave something behind'; 'I'm looking for leadership opportunities before, that wasn't me before, I was very quiet'
- Partnerships rather than data sources – potential model for future engagement in planning for and evaluating change – education discourse/transformational dialogue
- Sample – not representative – no homogenous voice!
- School culture & learner voice activity
- Opportunities to 'do more' – necessity for acknowledgment and evidence of impact
- Shared language within co-construction – avoidance of **adulteration**/check interpretation
- Variety of media to facilitate choices of expression & preferred mode of communication



# Sustainable response and practice – process, not product

- ❑ Shared practice – opportunity for learning (all stakeholders) – pace persistence, patience
  - support for schools - dissemination and sharing
  - inter-agency
- ❑ Inextricable links: inclusive education/framework & voice – attitude and buy in!
- ❑ CPD for teachers – confidence, skills, tools
- ❑ Leading by example – not confined to research and occasional projects! Habitual practice of learner discourse
- ❑ Significant links between 'voice'/being heard/having a say with 'positive learner-teacher relationships' **and** 'wellbeing'
- ❑ Commonalities in aspirations and goals for learning – the experience of day to day school environment - acknowledgement of which is key to progressing democratic, shared process and credible approach:
  - embed culture(s) of listening
  - support sustainable structure and response to learners' voices
- ❑ Leadership model – empowering and reflective – influence and innovation
- ❑ Importance of 'space, 'voice', 'audience' and 'influence' (Lundy, 2007) – reinforce: availability/use of different media to reach and access all voices

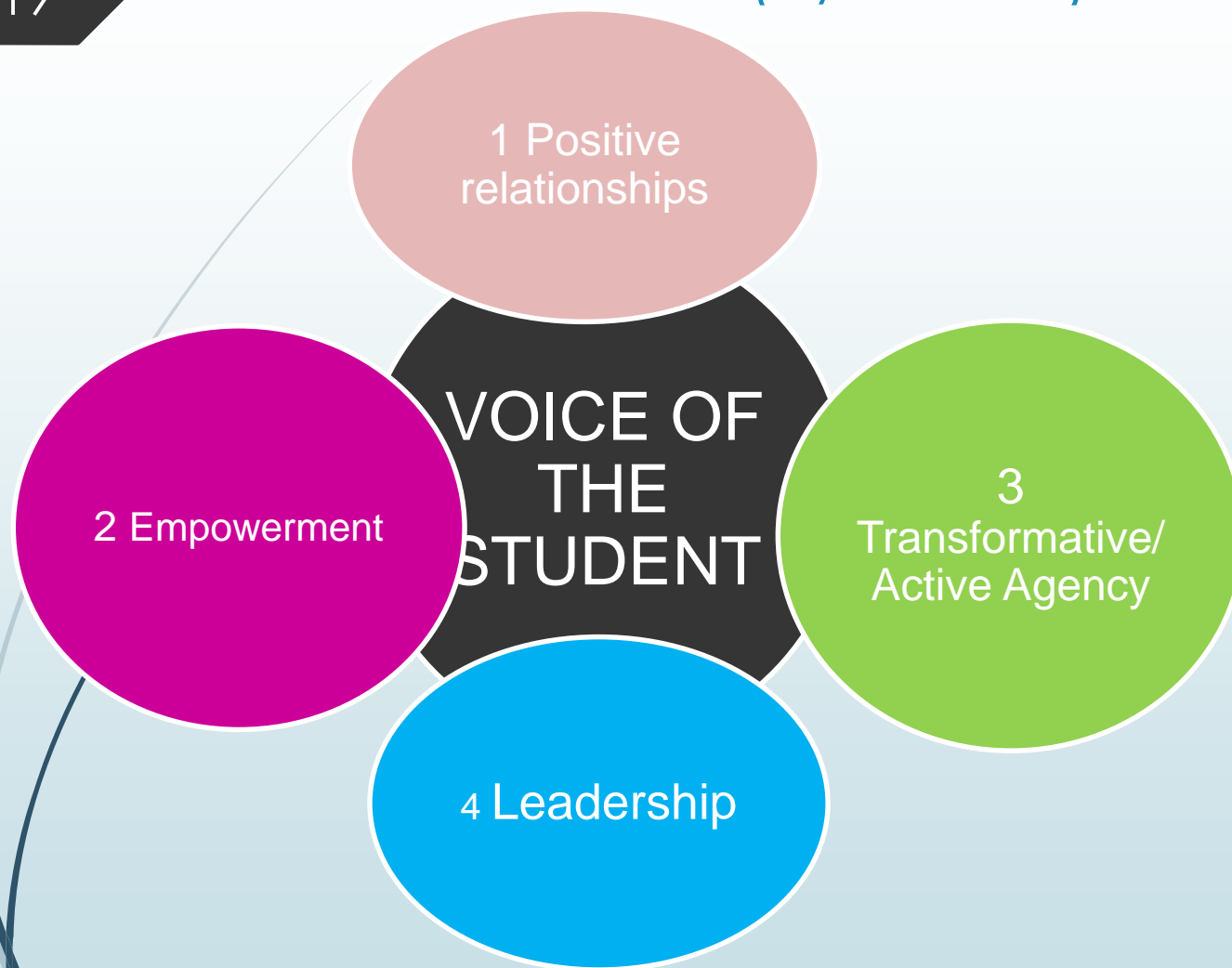
# Children's rights based participatory model (Lundy, 2007)



This model provides a way of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC which is intended to focus decision-makers on the distinct, albeit interrelated, elements of the provision. The four elements have a rational chronological order:

- **SPACE:** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view
- **VOICE:** Children must be facilitated to express their view
- **AUDIENCE:** The view must be listened to.
- **INFLUENCE:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

# Transformative Potential in the Engagement of Student Voice (Flynn 2013)



Space, Voice, Audience, Influence (Lundy 2007)

## LEARNER VOICE SPACE

**Important next steps:**  
inclusive framework and acknowledgement of all learner roles in dialogue:  
focus on response, not just process;  
sustainability;  
power relations/implications;  
a model for ongoing  
dialogue/development/informed change

The dialogic education environment:  
Leadership process and response to  
activate learners' voices

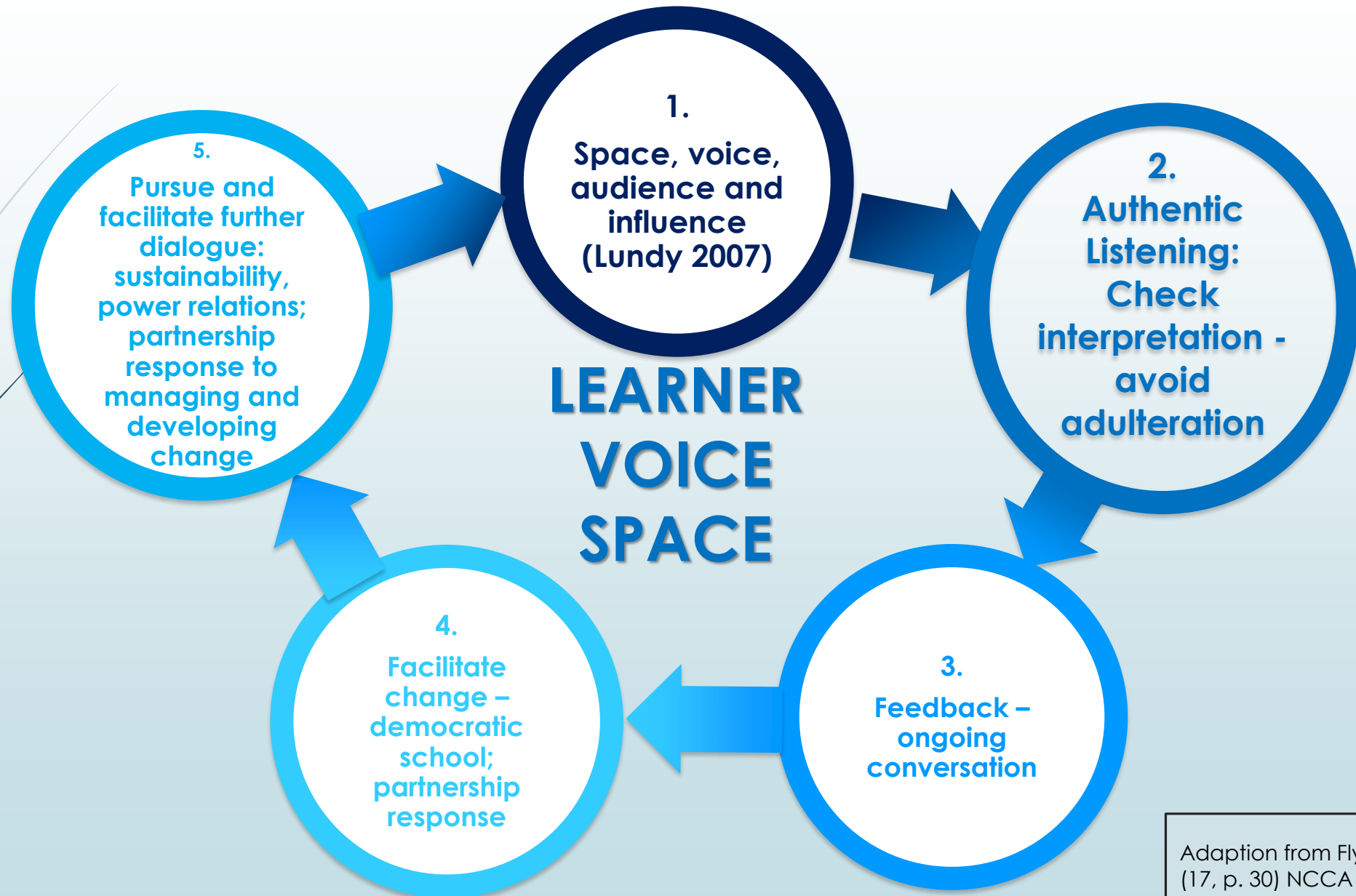
&

'the *learner* voice space'



# TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE – INCLUSIVE FRAMEWORK

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Adaption from Flynn, 2017, p. 30  
(17, p. 30) NCCA publication

What are the **challenges, choices and changes** required to support transformative dialogue within a learner voice space and how can you start the conversation?

Q.1



Q.2

What **roles** do you envisage for '**all learners**' in that space?

Q.4

What does this phrase mean to you; "***Nothing about us without us***"?



Q.3

Which learner are you and what is your role?



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What does 'voice' mean to you in your professional environment? How do you know when **you** have been heard?

Q.1



Q.2

How can you start/sustain the conversation about Learner Voice in your professional environment?

What are the challenges and opportunities in supporting and sustaining 'Learner Voice Space' as a process?  
Consider: **active listening, active agency and a respectful space for learners' voices**

Q.4



Q.3

What needs to be in place to ensure that all 'learners' can be heard, and how will **they** know **they** have been heard?



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Thank you for listening!

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