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Title: Exploring the associations between student participation, wellbeing and recognition at school

Abstract

Children's right to participate, at least in rhetoric, is well recognised, but what this means and the associated benefits in schools are less clear. This article synthesises findings of a large mixed-methods Australian study comprising policy analysis, qualitative interviews with students, teachers, and policymakers, and development of a Student Participation Scale, which was then used in a student survey to explore associations between participation and wellbeing. The study found that particular elements of participation (choice, influence and working together – but not 'voice') were strongly associated with greater wellbeing, both as a direct link and one mediated by intersubjective 'recognition' (relationships founded on reciprocal respect, valuing and care of others). The findings have considerable implications for both policy and practice in clarifying how participation is understood, practiced and progressed in different 'spaces' in schools, as well as identifying the cultural conditions necessary for simultaneously fostering both participation *and* wellbeing.

Keywords (4-6): *student wellbeing; participation; voice; relationships; recognition theory*

Introduction

It is now just over 30 years since widespread ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Despite considerable influence within a wide range of global contexts, difficulties remain in translating these rights for policy and practice (Grugel & Piper, 2007). Nowhere has this been more evident than when operationalising children's participation rights in schools (Lundy et al., 2012).

The potential benefits of student participation are many: improvements in learning, self-esteem, belonging, safety, and student-teacher relationships, fostering more democratic

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cultures, citizenship skills, improving school functioning and decision-making, and overall student wellbeing (de Róiste et al. 2012; Fielding, 2015; Gray & Hackling, 2009; Mannion, Sowerby & l'Anson 2015; Pearce & Wood, 2019). Despite this potential, student participation has been impeded by definitional ambiguity, structural constraints, and entrenched assumptions about children and their position in school hierarchies (Authors, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2006). Early efforts, such as student representative councils, often failed to deliver the benefits envisaged (Quinn & Owen, 2016; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Such experiences, along with increased accountability and academic performance pressures, may explain why many schools and school authorities have been slow to experiment further with student participation (Lundy et al. 2012).

In Australia, initiatives such as the Student Wellbeing Framework (Education Services Australia 2018, para. 2) endeavour to counter this by drawing attention to 'the strong association between safety, wellbeing and learning'. 'Student voice' features as one of five elements integral to this association, with participation positioned as critical for both wellbeing and learning, although research is needed to better understand the nature of this association.

In this article, we provide an overview of key findings from a large-scale, mixed-methods study that explored links between student participation and wellbeing at school. The study was ambitious, involving four phases and detailed findings for each of these have been reported elsewhere (see Authors et al. 2018, 2019a, 2019b, Under Review). Our aim in this article is to bring all the phases together, and in doing so provide a synthesis of the findings and situate their overall significance in strengthening knowledge, policy and practice concerning participation, particularly its association with students' social-emotional wellbeing.

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Background

Understanding student wellbeing

Wellbeing, in the context of schools, is typically connected with efforts to support students' mental health or social-emotional wellbeing. The definition of mental health in policy statements often reflects that of the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2001 para 1), which sits comfortably with the aims of education in most jurisdictions:

> a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

Recent large-scale (Powell et al. 2018) and longitudinal (Heinsch et al. 2020) research highlights Australian students' perspectives on what influences their wellbeing at school. The findings echo the multidimensional nature of the WHO definition, while highlighting the relational foundation of wellbeing – student wellbeing occurs within a network of relationships students have with parents, peers, friends, teachers, other staff and the wider community. Such relationships are central in building an enhanced sense of belonging, social connection, and opportunities to collaborate around a shared sense of accountability and purpose (Cohen 2006; Fielding 2015; Heinsch et al. 2020; Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016; Mannion, 2010).

As other research attests, wellbeing has become increasingly visible within the educational policy landscape in many countries (Heinsch et al. 2020; Author, 2017; Wyn 2007). Responses in schools have typically involved a multi-pronged approach: the integration of universal and targeted wellbeing programs, often with an emphasis on social and emotional learning (Durlak et al., 2011); improved monitoring and referral to support

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services, such as counselling, learning support etc. (Author, 2017); and emphasis on building relationships and school cultures that are conducive to students' wellbeing (Cohen 2006; Fielding 2015; Gray & Hackling 2009; Powell et al. 2018). To date, however, the third aspect (relationships and culture) has received considerably less attention (Powell et al. 2018), despite the importance students themselves place on relationships. This is possibly because achieving school cultures where students routinely *experience* (rather than *learn about*) wellbeing is more complex than 'off the shelf' intervention (Cohen 2006; Author, 2017). Indeed, the kind of changes that could lead to cultural improvements may challenge the hierarchies and processes that structure formal schooling, requiring reconsideration of how children are positioned within those structures, and how power, authority and decision-making are negotiated and experienced (Cohen 2006; Fielding 2015; Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016; Mannion 2010).

Understanding student participation

Much like student wellbeing, student participation has remained a largely ambiguous concept (Lundy et al., 2012). In practice, participation at school is applied to anything from simply attending school and 'participating' in lessons through to more personalised learning approaches and collaborative decision-making with adults on school community matters (Authors, 2019a). Correspondingly, the term student 'voice', while also problematised (Cook-Sather, 2006), has remained a proxy for participation in many school contexts, reducing conflation around participation as attendance, joining in, motivation or putting oneself forward. That said, a focus on 'voice' alone can restrict understandings of different ways by which students might participate, and may not always be understood in

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terms of the intergenerational dialogue necessary to hear, respond to and collaborate around students' input (Authors, 2019; Fielding 2004, 2015; Mannion, 2007, 2010).

Indeed, whatever the term, the central aim of the movement is to bring students and adults into greater *partnership* around the learning process and wider school community matters (Bessell & Gal, 2009; Fielding, 2015; Horgan et al., 2017; Mannion, 2010; Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015). In policy rhetoric, if not always in practice, this motive is support by children's participatory rights (afforded through Articles 12-15 of the UNCRC). In particular, Article 12, which is generally summarised as the requirement for children's views to be heard on all matters affecting their lives and that these be given due weight. Article 12 is one of the four overarching general principles of the UNCRC. This places children's views and insights – their 'voice' - as central to the interpretation and implementation of all other rights, including, notably, their education rights (Articles 28 and 29) (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016). However, elevating students to 'partners' challenges entrenched assumptions and long-standing educational conventions surrounding the position, status and capabilities of children and power, authority and expertise in schools (Authors, 2019a; Gray & Hackling, 2009; Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016; Mannion, 2010; Mayes et al., 2017; Pearce & Wood, 2019). As Cook-Sather (2006) has succinctly described, '"Student voice"…calls for a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students' (p.5). In other words, student participation is about shared presence, power and agency within school communities (Cook-Sather, 2006).

There has now been considerable scholarship surrounding student participation (Fielding, 2004,2015; Lundy, 2007; Mannion 2010; Mayes et al., 2017; Pearce & Wood, 2019; Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015) including the development of a range of models (such as Shier (2001) which builds upon Hart's (1992) well-known ladder of participation). Some

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of these models and typologies highlight the different forms participation might potentially take in different contexts or as 'steps' towards the kind of participation described by Cook-Sather (2006) above. Such participation (particularly within pedagogical contexts) is often referred to as 'radical' or 'transformative' in that, over time, the process of genuinely and openly listening and working together might lead to the challenging and subversion of current norms – student participation at school could lead to fundamental reconfigurations of the very structure and process of schooling (Fielding, 2004; Pearce & Wood, 2019). Of course, such a possibility can create dissonance, with enduring concerns (from teachers, parents and even students) that expanding student participation might lead to potential chaos (Mitra, 2006).

Drawing upon others' work (such as Arnot & Reay, 2007; Lundy, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2013) we have previously discussed the ways that power and authority play out in schools and the associated social and spatial implications for student participation (see Authors, 2018, 2019). Suffice to say here, that relational power dynamics (between students and teachers and amongst the peer group) influence what students say (or don't say), as well as influencing how student 'voice' is *received* and *interpreted* in schools.

Given the ambiguities highlighted above, student representative councils (SRCs) have remained the 'go to' strategy for offering students a 'voice' in Australian schools to date, even though these are frequently critiqued for being unrepresentative, tokenistic and adult-led (Lundy et al. 2012; Quinn & Owen, 2016). SRCs have likely prevailed, not only because they are relatively easy to incorporate into traditional systems, but because they align with teachers' preferences for student participation to be channelled in an organised, bounded way (Horgan et al. 2017). Meanwhile, students' preferred experiences of participation are often those that occur more informally through relational engagement (Horgan et al., 2017) which, as highlighted earlier, is also foundational to student wellbeing (Author, 2016).

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Recognition Theory

Relationships, then, emerge as an important point of commonality between student wellbeing and student participation. Recognition theory offers a lens for considering how such relationships and the surrounding culture in schools might be improved, all the while resonating with the kind of challenges and possibilities described above. Grounding their work in critical theory, recognition scholars – despite differences in emphasis – are largely interested in self-actualisation, social inequality and social justice at both the individual and group levels (Fraser, 1995; Honneth, 1995; Taylor, 1995). Applying this to our interests here, the UNCRC can be seen to represent a global political and legal act of recognition at the social group level, through entitling children to participatory rights (Articles 12–17). The associated 'struggle' to realise these rights across the different arenas and relationships in which children might participate (including schools) underscores children's subaltern status (Authors, 2019; Mannion, 2010). Indeed, these struggles, along with the impacts of misrecognition, are central components of recognition theory.

Turning to the individual level, Honneth's (1995) recognition theory offers a framework for considering interaction, relationships and the formation of identity, as well as conceptualising how wellbeing and participation might be linked. Honneth (1995) proposes that authentic and healthy intersubjective recognition comprises the intertwining of three strands: *love*, which refers to the emotional concern for the wellbeing and needs of an actual person; *rights*, which refers to respect for the equal moral accountability of the legal person; and *solidarity,* which is the valuing of particular traits and contributions to shared values. Although Honneth generally does not refer to children in his early theorisation of recognition, except in the context of primary relationships of love and care, his work on the links between

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social reproduction and identity formation, and the implications for justice, has important consequences for the place of children within societies (see Honneth, 2012).

Our starting point, consistent with the UNCRC and the Childhood Studies paradigm (described below), is that children belong to the class of morally responsible persons, are rights-bearers entitled to respect, and are people with talents and capabilities, who contribute to society and culture (Thomas, 2012). As such, Honneth's three strands of recognition retain considerable relevance. For this and a previous study (Authors, 2017), Honneth's terminology of love, rights, and solidarity were translated as 'cared for,' 'respected,' and 'valued' to make these more accessible for studying relational practices in school settings.

Childhood Studies

Childhood Studies emerged from a critique of narrow versions of 'the child' and a commitment to interdisciplinary approaches to researching their lives and experiences (James, Jenks and Prout 1998). Alongside the UNCRC (1989), Childhood Studies has shifted thinking about children's capabilities and place in society, and how these might be researched. It also points to the necessity of reconsidering adulthood and intergenerational relations (Woodhead, 2009).

Childhood Studies is closely linked to the concept of 'children's participation' and has sought both to promote and problematise children's agency and 'voice' both in research and in other contexts (Spyrou, Rosen & Cook, 2019). Correspondingly, the study reported here sought to give secondary students' views equal consideration alongside teachers, principals, and educational policymakers. In addition, the study was guided by a project advisory group which included students alongside project partners and other stakeholders. Childhood Studies

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also provided a critical lens throughout the different phases of the study – from considering the conceptualization of students in policy texts, to analysing the social and spatial influences shaping understandings and experiences of student participation, and drawing attention to the power relations between adults and students in schools.

Overview of the Study

The study reported here was entitled, *Improving Wellbeing Through Student Participation at School*. It aimed to strengthen knowledge, policy, and practice concerning student participation by identifying whether and how such participation may promote students' social and emotional wellbeing. The study utilised a mixed method approach to explore how student participation is understood, experienced, and practiced in Government and Catholic schools in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. While the researchers' working definition of participation focused broadly on children's active involvement in learning and decision-making processes within schools and the school community, 'student participation' was not pre-defined for the purposes of the study, allowing for an inductive approach.

The following research questions (RQs) framed the study:

RQ1: How is student participation currently articulated in education policy in Australia?

RQ2: How do students, teachers, principals and policy stakeholders understand participation in NSW schools? And how is it currently experienced by students and staff in schools?

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RQ3: To what extent is participation at school associated with student wellbeing, and which specific elements of participation are core predictors of student wellbeing?

RQ4: Do Honneth's modes of recognition mediate the relationship between participation and wellbeing?

As evident in these research questions, the study incorporated key tenets from Childhood Studies and recognition theory, which have been shown to be important in earlier research on student wellbeing in schools (Authors, 2017). The current study extended this theorising while also shedding further light on assumptions about children, their agency and relationships in schools through qualitative and quantitative empirical work.

Materials and methods

The research was undertaken over three years in four phases:

Phase 1: A policy analysis reviewing current New South Wales (NSW) and federal government education policies and guidelines ($N = 142$) to understand how student participation is currently articulated in education policy.

Phase 2: A qualitative phase involving interviews with school staff ($N = 32$) and policy makers ($N = 9$), and focus groups with Year 7–10 students ($N = 177$) across 10 NSW schools to understand how student participation is understood and experienced.

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Phase 3: An initial quantitative phase, to develop a valid and reliable scale to measure student participation (536 students across eight schools).

Phase 4: A final quantitative phase, in which an on-line survey including the scale was administered to Year 7–10 students across 16 schools ($N = 1435$) to investigate the associations among participation, recognition, and wellbeing.

Given word limits and our emphasis in this article on drawing the study together and synthesising the overall significance, the methods are explained only briefly here. Further detail on the methods can be found in related publications (Authors, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, Under Review) and in open access research reports at: (institutional website omitted).

Phase 1: Policy analysis

The policy analysis was undertaken in three stages. The first stage involved identifying relevant national, state, and system-level policies and associated documents (webpages, frameworks, departmental strategic plans etc.) through on-line searches and advice from the research partners (the NSW Government and Catholic school systems). All education policies including the terms participation, involve, engage, consult, communicate, voice, views, perspective, connect, collaborate, inclusive were initially included in the analysis (see Authors, 2019a). Taking an interpretivist approach (Yanow, 2000) an initial content analysis was undertaken of the 142 documents to illuminate the framing and determine whether they substantively included the concept of student participation. To determine the relevance of a policy, four questions were asked of the policies:

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- What is the aim of the document/policy?
- Who is responsible for implementing the policy?
- What are the key words?
- What is the context of the key words?

For the second stage, an analysis tool was developed that focused on the language used to depict students and their meaningful participation. This tool was developed from a synthesis of prominent models and typologies of young people's participation, particularly those by Hart (1992), Holdsworth (2000), Lundy (2007), Rudduck and Fielding (2006), and Shier (2001). We identified the commonalties across tiers in these models and translated the ideas into the language of voice scholarship and rights-based approaches in the school context (such as, Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016; Pearce & Wood, 2016). In doing so, we considered the *conceptualisation* and *status* of students within the various tiers, their *positioning* and *power* in the participatory process and the nature of the intergenerational collaboration described.

The tool we developed from this work comprised a series of categories by which student participation may be articulated (and enacted). These ranged from 'meaningful' to tokenistic. Given the problematic nature of terms such as 'meaningful' (e.g., meaningful for whom and under what conditions?), we developed the following definition of 'meaningful' student participation for the purposes of analysis:

1. *Students* are presented as full and active members of the school community in partnership with adults who have a stake in the education endeavour, broadly defined;

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2. *Participation* is framed not solely in terms of student engagement to achieve academic outcomes, but in terms of student wellbeing, positive experiences of school, education or effecting change.

We adopted the term 'tokenistic', popularised in Hart's Ladder of Participation[1] (1992), to refer to those policies that ostensibly promoted the idea of participation (or often 'voice') but were enacted *upon* students and /or aligned solely to instrumental (or future-orientated) aims. We also created an intermediary category, which we labelled 'partial', for those policies that fell between our 'meaningful' and 'tokenistic' categories.

During the categorisation process we were quite liberal in our application of 'meaningful', so as to progress policies that might be relevant for this category upon further probing. In total, 15 documents were categorised as 'meaningful' and progressed to the third stage: a thorough discursive analysis. In this final stage, each document was analysed for meaning and intent, based on the following series of questions: how is participation framed in the policy?; how are students framed (or constructed) in/by the policy?; is any relationship articulated between participation and wellbeing and/or implied between participation and children's rights in the policy?; what are the types of strategies/mechanisms advocated in the policy for promoting participation? Emergent themes and framings regarding 'students' and 'participation' were then identified, with particular attention to the extent to which students were positioned as partners (Bessell & Gal, 2009) in the education process within each policy.

[1] Hart's (1992) well-known 'ladder' of participation depicts a range of ways in which children and young people might participate ranging from tokenistic (at the bottom of the ladder) to initiating an endeavour and sharing decision making with adults (top of the ladder).

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Phase 2: Qualitative interviews and focus groups

Phase 2 involved focus groups with students and semi-structured, individual interviews with teachers, principals, and policy personnel from the Government and Catholic school sectors. Ten schools were selected in consultation with the research partners. From these schools, students were recruited at random (e.g., every fifth student on the school roll) for a Year 7–8 (aged 13–14) focus group and a Year 9–10 (aged 15–16) focus group. A total of 177 students participated across the ten schools. The process for the focus groups was designed in consultation with students in the project advisory group, aiming to facilitate rich conversations guided by open questions, opportunities to jot down ideas on Post it© notes and reflect back, activities and vignettes to stimulate discussion. These included a 'Being the Principal' activity to envision the changes needed to improve participation, and a mapping activity based upon Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation. In this latter activity participants were asked to consider where they would position current school participatory experiences on the ladder, offering a vehicle for discussion, debate and to explore the benefits and barriers to participation. Overall, the focus groups explored student conceptualisations of participation, the benefits and barriers, who initiates and experiences participation, their personal experiences of participation and what could change or be improved at their school.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with nine principals, 23 teachers and nine policymakers. The interviews followed a similar structure of questions to those used in the student focus groups – from understandings, practices and experiences of participation to barriers and what could change. They were consistent with critical constructivist approaches and encouraged conversation and reflection on deeper assumptions, values, attitudes and beliefs about participation in schools. The interview questions are available from the authors upon request.

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The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and coded using NVivo. The intentional structure of the interviews and focus groups – the 'what, why, how, who' of participation, the barriers, and what could change – guided the initial reduction and analytic categorising of data from the interviews. The Post-it© notes and the 'ladders' from each focus group were photographed and uploaded into NVivo for coding, and cross-referenced to transcribed discussions. The combined data were analysed and coded for recurring emergent themes and patterns.

Phase 3: Developing a reliable scale

The aim of Phase 3 was to develop a valid and reliable quantitative scale to measure student participation in schools. The scale was developed by drawing upon four elements of participation arising from the Phase 2 findings, concepts from existing theories and models of children's participation (such as those described above in Phase 1), as well as rigorous discussions amongst the research team and the young people's advisory group. An existing validated scale on student engagement by Fredricks et al. (2005) was added to test convergent validity of the scale.

The scale items were developed in two consecutive samples, involving 253 and then 283 different students across the same seven schools. Detailed quantitative results pertaining to scale development and a list of all scale items are published elsewhere in an open access journal (link removed for blind review). In summary, results from exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, reliability and validity analyses, produced a 38-item 'Student Participation Scale' (SPS). The SPS has six elements consisting of working together (9 items), having voice about schooling (9 items), having a say with influential people at school, such as student leaders and the Principal (5 items), having voice about activities outside the

classroom (3 items), having influence on decisions made at school (7 items), and having choice at school (5 items). Each sub-scale had excellent internal consistency, sound content and construct validity, and configual and metric invariant structure across demographic groups (gender, Australian Indigenous status, cultural and linguistic status, disability status, and school year level).

Phase 4: On-line student survey

Phase 4 involved administering the SPS within a wider survey to test the associations among participation, recognition, and wellbeing. The survey contained 90 items comprising demographic questions and the SPS, along with wellbeing at school (8 items) and recognition (6 items) scales developed from the authors' previous large-scale study on wellbeing in schools (see, Authors, 2016; 2019). The anonymous survey was administered online, which students accessed via computers or other devices in school. The Phase 4 student sample (N = 1,435) ranged in age from 11 to 17 years and was recruited from 16 secondary schools.

Ethics

Ethics approval was gained from the lead institution's Human Research Ethics Committee (ECN-15-017; ECN-16-029) and subsequent approval granted by the state school system (SERAP 2015147) and each relevant Diocese for the Catholic schools. For Phases 2–4 of the study, participation was voluntary, and undertaken with the participants' (and parental) consent, with participants retaining the right to cease their participation at any time by signalling to the researcher or closing down the survey. Participating schools and individual participants were anonymised in all outputs. The

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research team also worked from the premise that it is ethical practice to translate the findings into resources and materials that might support schools' efforts to improve student participation and wellbeing. In addition to project reports and academic publications, good practice guides and professional development materials were developed from the findings (see, Authors, forthcoming).

Results

In this section we present the main findings in relation to the four research questions guiding the study. Given space constraints and to enhance readability we provide brief excerpts from the data to highlight the headline findings pertaining to each research question. As flagged previously, the detailed data supporting these headline claims can be accessed in the associated peer-reviewed publication and project report for each phase (see Authors, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, under review).

1. *How is student participation currently articulated in education policy in Australia?*

The overarching finding from the policy analysis was that there was no specific educational policy mandating or supporting student participation in NSW, nor at the federal level in Australia. Student participation was referred to in a wide range of the documents analysed but it was rarely defined. Even among the 15 documents in the final stage of the policy analysis, both 'participation' and 'students' were conceptualized in a range of ways.

Specifically, eight different understandings of participation were identified among these 15 documents (often more than one in the same document). These framed participation as:

- consultation
- engagement

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- connectedness
- positive and respectful relationships
- equality or inclusion
- student leadership
- a right
- collective decision-making.

This range of understandings of participation may reflect the broad, multi-faceted nature of school life but inconsistencies and tensions were identified. For example, anti-racism guidelines call upon student action teams to develop and coordinate initiatives for other students, but infer that leadership will fall to older students, implying participation is dependent on seniority. There was also a heavy reliance on SRCs across the documentation, with the majority defaulting to consulting with this group regardless of the issue at hand. This over-reliance risks conflating student *representation* and student *participation*.

In addition to the different ways participation was framed, *students* were also conceptualized in various ways (again, even among the 15 documents categorised as 'meaningful'). A continuum was identified, which for the 'meaningful' documents ranged from students being *recognised* as actors, but afforded little or no participatory scope, through to students being afforded partnership roles both at an individual and collective level across school life (for examples from the documents see Authors, 2019a). Between these were documents where students are positioned as stakeholders to be *consulted* with or as partners at an individual level only (either in learning or wellbeing matters). Adding the earlier groupings from the Stage 2 categorisation process into this continuum, the conceptualisation of students ranged from 'objects' education happens to, through to stakeholders to consult

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with on learning and school community matters and, occasionally, to partners with adults, at individual and/or collective levels, across school life.

Overall, then, the policy analysis showed little consensus in how participation is framed, nor how students are conceptualised, even among policy documents produced in the same year and by the same department. This suggests little coherence in the current NSW policy landscape in regard to the notion of student participation at the time of the study.

2. *How do students, teachers, principals and policy stakeholders understand participation in NSW schools? How is it currently experienced by students and staff in schools?*

The policymakers who were interviewed tended to align student participation with student involvement and decision-making in their own learning, referred to variously as student-cantered, personalised, or individualised learning. While this focused primarily on students with additional support needs, some policymakers envisaged this should or would be expanded to all students in the near future. Beyond this, policymakers referred to participation mainly in terms of adult-directed consultation. Most discussed the potential for such consultation both at the school level, to inform school planning, as well as at a systemic level in relation to the development of educational policy.

In contrast to the policymaker interviews, there was much less clarity amongst students and staff about what student participation is or could be, even within individual schools. This was despite all the schools in the study actively seeking to offer opportunities for students to 'participate'. Actual examples of 'student participation' initiatives and efforts in schools offered greater insight into participants' working understandings of the concept.

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Across the schools, participation initiatives and efforts clustered into two main arenas: the classroom and the co-curricular space (see below for further explanation). In line with policymakers' emphasis on student involvement in learning, the *classroom* emerged as a key space of change and innovation. For instance, in several schools there were opportunities for students to make *choices,* such as how to submit an assignment (making a video, writing an essay) or choosing the topic for a project. Indeed, schools were largely operating out of traditional teacher-led approaches to learning, but with efforts towards more 'engaging' activities and relational pedagogies, although this was inconsistent and largely dependent upon the approach of individual teachers (students noting these were often younger and more recently trained). Nevertheless, students expressed appreciation of teachers' efforts and did not generally have any higher expectations for their participation in this space. Two schools were exceptions in having fully adopted problem and project-based approaches to learning (PBL) which appeared to have recast expectations of what is possible, with both students and staff describing their experiences of these in positive terms.

In contrast to the classroom, the *co-curricular* arena was much more contested in terms of expectations, with the breadth of possible participatory opportunities potentially masking underlying intergenerational issues. The co-curricular arena included consultative opportunities for *voice,* through SRC-type structures, scope to vote on options (such as school camp locations), taking part in sports and activity clubs, as well as opportunities to *work together* through many other special interest groups. When the SRC and other groups were assigned annual organisational tasks, such as organising the sports festival, these were generally not spoken about favourably, with persistent communication issues raised alongside tensions around motivation, authority and decision-making. A number of the schools were trialling different formats and structures for the SRC in an effort to address such tensions, but

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their focus was generally on tackling communication between students rather than on tensions surrounding agency and *influence* in dialogue and collaboration between students and staff.

There was a tentative shift toward furthering participation in co-curricular activities: for example, schools involving students directly in school planning processes, sometimes to a considerable extent. There were also a few examples of student-led co-curricular groups that appeared to have endured well over many years. Notwithstanding some evidence of greater participation, the co-curricular arena emerged as a space where intergenerational 'struggle' was evident, despite aims to the contrary.

Implicit in what was said about both arenas was the critical importance of collaborative *dialogue* and *relationships* (both as a space for participation in themselves and as foundational to all participation). Relational interactions between students and teachers appeared to be becoming more egalitarian in most schools, potentially creating the kind of cultural preconditions necessary for student participation to be experienced more broadly across school life.

Overall, four elements of participation were apparent in the Phase 2 data, as either currently experienced or potentially important:

- Having *voice* (staff listening to students' views);
- Having *influence* (students' views able to effect change);
- Having *choice* (both educational and personal choices);
- *Working together* (intergenerational collaboration).

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3. *To what extent is participation at school associated with student wellbeing, and which specific elements of participation are core predictors of student wellbeing?*

In answer to research question 3, a two-stage hierarchical regression analysis was conducted, with mean total wellbeing scores as the criterion. As mentioned previously, detailed results are available in an open access report (link removed for blind review). Zero order correlations (see Table 1) showed that students with a disability and those in a higher year level at school reported significantly lower wellbeing scores. To control for their significant relationship with wellbeing, disability status and year at school were entered into the regression model at Step 1. Step 1 was significant, accounting for just under 9% of variance in wellbeing ($p < .001$). Addition of the six participation (having voice about schooling, having voice about activities outside the classroom, having a say with influential people at school, having influence on decisions made at school, having choice at school and working together) variables in Step 2, significantly increased the prediction of wellbeing by an extra 40% ($p < .001$). These results show that together the elements of participation were significantly associated with wellbeing, after controlling for disability and year at school. The eight variables together significantly and strongly predicted wellbeing, accounting for 49% of its variance ($p < .001$).

[Table 1 near here]

Looking at the elements of participation separately, working together, having choice, having influence, and having a say with influential people were all significantly associated with wellbeing ($p < .001$), and in that order, after taking the effects of the other elements, disability status, and year at school into account. The standardised regression coefficients were as follows: working together, $\beta = 0.29$; having choice, $\beta = 0.20$; having influence, $\beta =$

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0.15; having a say with influential people, β = 0.12. Voice about schooling and voice about activities were not significantly associated with wellbeing, after taking the effects of the other elements, disability status, and year at school into account (β = 0.04, p = .211 and β = - 0.02, p = .290, respectively).

That 'working together' emerged as the strongest predictor of wellbeing perhaps underlines the relational basis of participation. That the two voice elements did not achieve statistical significance after taking the effects of the other elements into account, suggests that simply voicing an opinion does not contribute to wellbeing. Rather it is the impact of that voice – through influence, choice, or shared action – that really matters. In practical terms, it should be noted that around 40% of the variance in wellbeing was shared between all the predictor variables (i.e., all six participation variables and the two covariates, disability status and year at school). This overlapping variance suggests that implementing any one of these elements (opportunities to work together, make choices, and have voice with influence) may offer benefits to wellbeing, with particular attention on fostering collaborative relationships.

4. *Do Honneth's modes of recognition mediate the relationship between participation and wellbeing?*

While the regression analyses reported above found strong associations between participation and wellbeing, subsequent analyses investigated *why* this association exists. These analyses investigated whether a potential relationship between participation and wellbeing may be explained by participation evoking experiences of recognition, which may in turn evoke wellbeing. Specifically, they tested whether recognition mediated the

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participation–wellbeing relationship, and whether recognition mediated the wellbeing–participation association (associations in both directions). Both mediation analyses controlled for disability status, year at school, cultural status, gender, and Indigenous status. Mediation analyses were conducted using Hayes' (2017) PROCESS, a specialist add-on program in IBM SPSS; analyses were based on 5,000 bias corrected bootstrapped standard errors (Hayes 2017).

The first analysis found that recognition mediated the relationship between participation and wellbeing, with a significant indirect effect, $B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.02$, $\beta = 0.29$, (95% CI bc: 0.29 – 0.38). The direct effect was also significant (see Figure 1a). The mediation model explained 64% of variance in wellbeing, an increase of 18% from 46% of variance explained without recognition in the model. Since students with greater wellbeing may be more likely to engage in participation activities, the second mediation analysis tested the reverse order, with wellbeing as the antecedent variable and participation as the outcome. The second analysis also found a significant indirect effect of wellbeing via recognition on participation, indicating a significant mediation, $B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.03$, $\beta = 0.13$, (95% CI bc: 0.07 – 0.16). The direct path from wellbeing to participation remained significant (see Figure 1b). While the second analysis accounted for 45% of variance in participation, this was only a 1% increase from 44% without the mediator included.

These results support the role of recognition in explaining the association between participation and wellbeing, with a stronger result for the participation–wellbeing relationship than the reverse direction. These findings support participation as a way of fostering recognition and wellbeing within the school community. While students who already have positive wellbeing might be likely to experience greater recognition and engage in more

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participation activities, this pathway was not as strong as the participation–recognition–wellbeing route, indicating support for introducing participation strategies and activities into schools as a pathway to wellbeing.

[Insert Figures 1(a) and (b) near here]

Discussion

This research confirms the interest in student participation in Australian education. This is evident in the frequent use of the term in educational policy (in 142 policies in total) and the efforts being made in schools to create opportunities where students might 'participate'. However, the Phase 1 policy findings suggest there is currently little clarity or coherence within educational policy regarding what student participation is or could be, with students conceptualised in highly contradictory ways and participation frequently justified in terms of improved outcomes and achievement. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Phase 2 data highlighted that efforts towards improving participation in many schools tended to be rather ad-hoc variations on traditional approaches (such as SRCs, having a say in school events), with little transformative potential.

There were exceptions in other schools in the Phase 2 sample, including the Project Based Learning (PBL) schools, where planned, innovative practice was evident in the range of facilitated ways that students were offered voice, choice, influence and possibilities for working collaboratively. Such practice tended to acknowledge the relational aspects of participation and the way that power and authority were exercised, addressing rather than reinforcing what others have widely argued to be the subordinate position of students (Mannion, 2010; Pearce & Wood, 2019; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Robinson & Taylor, 2013).

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A key imperative from this study, then, is to revisit at a policy level how students are conceptualised within the context of schools and education with respect to voice, agency, issues of power etc., and to articulate a more consistent, egalitarian view in order to foster wider understanding and deeper engagement. A second imperative is to pay closer attention to the ways in which the term 'participation', including the proxy, 'voice,' is used in both educational policy and in practice within schools. Where 'voice' continues to be used in policy, it needs to be clearly defined and located within broader participation frameworks and efforts.

Both the qualitative and quantitative findings attest to the need to prioritise the quality of adult-child interaction in schools (Mannion 2010; Pearce & Wood, 2019), with an emphasis on building positive, respectful relationships. Honneth's (1995, 2012) theory of recognition offers a framework for doing so, with the results indicating that recognition mediates the positive association between participation and wellbeing. Earlier research has shown that Honneth's tripartite recognition theory is a valuable framework for approaching cultural change and student-teacher relationships, such that the *experience* of wellbeing in schools might be improved (rather than just *learning about* wellbeing) (Authors, 2017). Similarly, in this study, the combined results across all phases clearly highlight that student participation is not about particular initiatives or programs, but rather a way of life in schools that offers students the opportunity to experience being cared for, respected and valued through positive relationships. Focusing attention on *purpose* (the question of *why* rather than on *what* schools do (e.g., in relation to SRCs)) also encourages exploration of why some individuals or groups of students may not feel cared for, respected and valued, and how this might be addressed.

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Overall, the key message arising from this research is that opportunities for meaningful student participation (voice, choice, influence, and working together) across all aspects of school life are associated with recognition and student wellbeing. While the quantitative results are based on a cross-sectional correlational design and causality can therefore not be claimed, the mediation results support a stronger directional pathway from participation to wellbeing via recognition, than from the opposite direction. Schools and school systems might therefore begin by ensuring that efforts to improve participation in schools reflect such evidence. Engaging in processes and planning efforts to map these elements across school domains, and seeking to incorporate opportunities for students to experience these four elements, could be practical starting points. Examining whether and how current approaches to pedagogy reflect these elements of participation might also be illuminating. Schools might ask: 'Do our efforts at participation inside and outside the classroom create the conditions for recognition to occur?' This will help focus attention on culture (recognition), without which the impact of schools' efforts in terms of both student participation and wellbeing are likely to be diminished.

Conclusion

The contemporary reality of schooling is that content and learned knowledge is rapidly becoming sidelined in an online world and particularly in pandemic conditions (Wood et al., 2020). More important are skills for life-long learning, inquiry and information processing, attributes such as tenacity, adaptability and resilience, and tools to manage wellbeing, relationships and social and workplace participation (Cohen 2006; Fielding 2015; Wood et al., 2020; Wyn 2007). Now more than ever, there is a need to bring wellbeing and participation together as core business of schools – to dismantle dualistic approaches that

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separate participation and wellbeing from teaching and learning – with the UNCRC providing a primary imperative to do so (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016).

While it has long been advocated that upholding children's right to participate will offer wellbeing benefits, there has been very little direct investigation of this association. The results of this research now offer clear evidence of the links and highlight the foundational elements by which this connection might be realised, with collaborative working and learning being key. Therefore, this study provides empirical support for current thinking around student participation, including the call for a shift from 'student voice' to intergenerational dialogue and collaboration (Fielding, 2015; Mannion, 2010; Horgan et al., 2017; Lundy, 2007; Pearce & Wood, 2019). It is in this intergenerational, relational space that the wellbeing benefits of student participation are most likely to be realised, which arguably are key to the kind of learning possibilities required and sought by 21st century students.

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Table 1

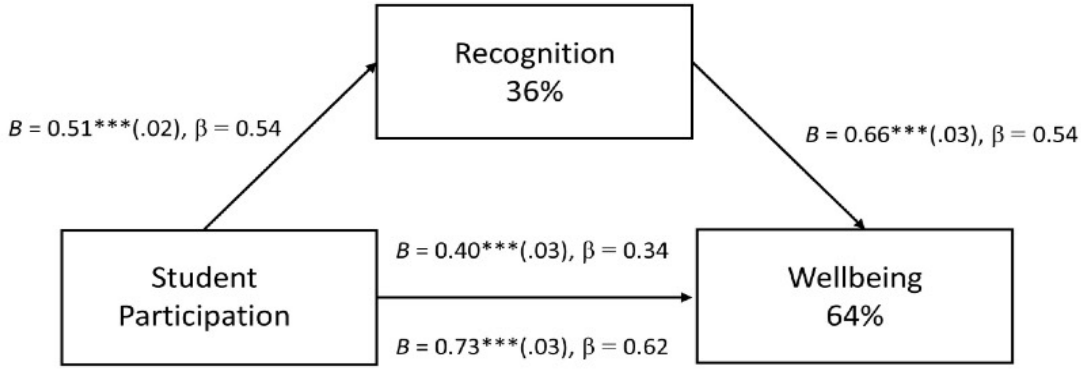
Correlations Between the Eight Predictors of Wellbeing at School, Recognition, and Wellbeing at School

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Disability status	--	.00	.15	.10	.14	.10	.15	.12	.25	.19
2	Year at school		--	-.16	-.18	-.12	-.14	-.19	-.12	-.15	-.21
3	Working			--	.65	.62	.59	.74	.56	.58	.60
4	Voice about				--	.61	.71	.65	.53	.42	.50
5	Having a say					--	.56	.66	.52	.47	.52
	with influential										
6	Voice about						--	.58	.50	.36	.43
7	Having influence							--	.59	.54	.58
8	Having choice								--	.46	.51
9	Recognition									--	.75
1	Wellbeing										--

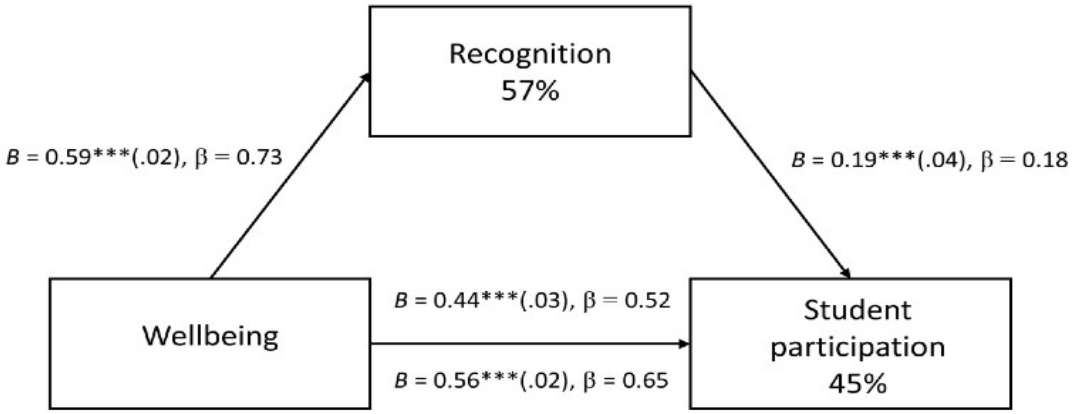
Note. All correlations employed Pearson's *r*, except for year at school which used Spearman's r_s, and disability status which used point-biserial *r*. All correlations were significant at $p <$ .001, except for the relationship between year at school and disability status, which were not significantly associated. Disability status was coded 0 = Self-reported disability, 1 = Does not self-report a disability.

Figures 1(a) and 1(b)

(a) Mediation model 1: Recognition mediates the participation–wellbeing relationship.



(b) Mediation model 2: Recognition mediates the wellbeing–participation relationship.



Note. B = Unstandardized regression coefficients. β = Standardized regression coefficient. Numbers inside brackets are bootstrapped standard errors. $p < .001$***