



# School Leadership Perspectives on Student Voice and Shared Decision-Making: Advancing Inclusive Practices in Irish Post-Primary Education

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## ABSTRACT

Meaningful student participation has become an essential component of contemporary educational improvement, yet the translation of policy aspirations into everyday school practice remains inconsistent. This study examines how school leaders perceive the role of student voice and the extent to which students are involved in institutional decision-making within Irish post-primary schools. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve school leaders to capture their experiences, interpretations, and leadership practices. The analysis indicates that participants widely regard authentic student engagement as a catalyst for stronger relationships, improved school climate, and more inclusive educational environments. The findings further demonstrate that sustained student participation depends on transparent communication, mutual trust, supportive leadership, and organisational structures that encourage collaboration between staff and students. Despite these positive perspectives, participants identified practical constraints, including limited time, uneven participation, varying levels of student confidence, and institutional traditions that restrict meaningful involvement in governance. School leaders also highlighted the importance of equipping students with leadership competencies and decision-making skills to ensure that participation extends beyond consultation toward genuine partnership. The study concludes that strengthening inclusive leadership practices, embedding student voice within school governance, and providing targeted professional and student development opportunities are essential for narrowing the gap between educational policy and practice. These findings contribute to ongoing discussions surrounding participatory leadership and offer practical directions for fostering inclusive decision-making in post-primary education.

**KEYWORDS:** Student voice, Student participation, Educational leadership, Inclusive school governance, Shared decision-making.

## INTRODUCTION

Educational systems across the world have increasingly recognized that students should be regarded as active contributors to school improvement rather than passive recipients of educational services. Over the past two decades, research has consistently demonstrated that meaningful student participation enhances learning environments by encouraging collaboration, strengthening democratic values, and improving institutional responsiveness. Rather than limiting students' involvement to classroom activities, contemporary educational frameworks advocate for their participation in broader school governance, curriculum development, policy formation, and strategic planning. This shift reflects an evolving understanding of schools as inclusive communities in which learners possess valuable perspectives that can shape educational quality and

institutional effectiveness [1].

Student voice has emerged as a central concept within inclusive education because it acknowledges students as legitimate stakeholders whose experiences can inform educational decision-making. Earlier educational models primarily viewed students as beneficiaries of policies designed by adults, whereas current perspectives recognise that students possess unique knowledge of teaching practices, school climate, wellbeing, and everyday learning experiences. When educational institutions actively seek and respond to these perspectives, they create environments characterised by trust, transparency, and shared responsibility. Such practices strengthen relationships among students, teachers, and school leaders while fostering a stronger sense of belonging and mutual respect throughout the school community.

Research conducted before 2025 has shown that authentic student participation extends beyond consultation or symbolic representation. Genuine engagement requires opportunities for students to influence decisions that affect their educational experiences and contribute to continuous school development. Schools that successfully embed participatory approaches frequently report improvements in student motivation, classroom engagement, collaborative problem-solving, and organisational culture. These outcomes are particularly significant in post-primary education, where adolescents seek greater autonomy, responsibility, and recognition as capable contributors to school life. Consequently, educational leadership has increasingly shifted toward collaborative governance models that value dialogue, partnership, and collective decision-making [2].

Inclusive school leadership plays a pivotal role in translating the principles of student participation into everyday practice. School leaders establish the organisational culture, allocate resources, develop participation structures, and influence staff attitudes toward student involvement. Leadership approaches grounded in openness, mutual respect, and shared accountability encourage students to participate confidently in discussions regarding school policies, wellbeing initiatives, teaching and learning improvements, and extracurricular development. Conversely, leadership practices that rely solely on hierarchical decision-making often restrict opportunities for meaningful student engagement, resulting in participation that is limited to formal representation rather than genuine influence.

Although national and international education policies developed before 2025 have consistently promoted children's rights, democratic participation, and learner-centred education, implementation across schools has remained uneven. Many educational systems have introduced student councils, consultation mechanisms, and participatory initiatives; however, evidence suggests that these structures often operate with limited authority over institutional decisions. In numerous cases, students are invited to express opinions without receiving meaningful opportunities to influence outcomes, creating a disconnect between policy aspirations and everyday educational practice. This implementation gap continues to challenge efforts to establish genuinely inclusive school governance [3].

The Irish post-primary education sector reflects many of these international developments. Educational reforms introduced before 2025 have increasingly encouraged schools to strengthen student wellbeing, active citizenship, inclusive practice, and collaborative leadership. Schools have been encouraged to create environments where students contribute to school improvement, participate in evaluating learning experiences, and engage with issues affecting the

wider school community. Nevertheless, variations remain in how these expectations are interpreted and implemented across different schools. While some institutions have embedded participatory practices within leadership and governance structures, others continue to rely on traditional administrative approaches that limit meaningful student involvement.

Previous studies conducted before 2025 have highlighted several factors that influence successful implementation of student voice initiatives. Organisational culture, leadership commitment, teacher attitudes, communication practices, student confidence, and the availability of structured participation opportunities all shape the effectiveness of student engagement. Schools characterised by mutual trust and collaborative relationships are generally more successful in sustaining authentic participation than institutions where communication remains predominantly one-directional. Furthermore, the development of students' leadership capabilities, confidence, and decision-making skills has been identified as an essential prerequisite for meaningful participation within complex school environments [4].

Despite growing scholarly attention to student voice, comparatively fewer studies have examined how school leaders themselves understand and operationalize participatory leadership within Irish post-primary schools. Existing literature has predominantly focused on students' experiences, classroom engagement, or policy implementation, while less attention has been directed toward the perspectives of senior and middle leaders responsible for translating policy into everyday organisational practice. Understanding leadership perspectives is particularly important because these individuals influence institutional priorities, establish participation mechanisms, and determine the extent to which student contributions are incorporated into school governance.

This study addresses that gap by examining school leaders' perceptions of student voice and student participation in decision-making within Irish post-primary schools. It investigates how educational leaders understand the value of student participation, the organisational conditions that facilitate inclusive engagement, and the practical barriers that continue to limit authentic involvement. By exploring leadership experiences across different post-primary settings, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of participatory educational leadership and inclusive school governance before 2025 [5].

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This investigation adopted a qualitative research methodology grounded in an interpretivist philosophical perspective to explore how school leaders understand

and experience student voice within Irish post-primary education. The interpretivist approach was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to examine participants beliefs, experiences, and interpretations within their natural educational settings. Rather than measuring predefined variables, the study sought to understand how school leaders construct meaning around student participation and its role in school decision-making. The research was guided by three central questions examining leaders' understanding of student voice, their perspectives on student involvement in institutional decision-making, and their experiences with the factors that promote or hinder meaningful participation in schools [6].

A phenomenological research design was employed because the study focused on participants lived experiences and personal interpretations of leadership practices associated with student engagement. This methodological approach allowed the researchers to gain detailed insights into how school leaders perceive inclusive leadership and how these perceptions influence the implementation of participatory practices. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection because they offered sufficient flexibility to explore participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. Open-ended questioning encouraged participants to provide detailed descriptions, practical examples, and reflections that deepened the qualitative data.

## Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from a broad range of Irish post-primary school settings. Schools were chosen to capture diversity in geographical location, governance structure, student population, and socioeconomic context. Consequently, the study included urban and rural schools, DEIS and non-DEIS institutions, co-educational schools, as well as single-sex boys' and girls' schools. Different organisational models of post-primary education were represented, including voluntary secondary schools, Education and Training Board (ETB) schools, and community and comprehensive schools. This diversity strengthened the study by allowing leadership experiences to be explored across contrasting educational environments [7].

The participant group consisted of twelve practising school leaders occupying senior and middle leadership positions. These included deputy principals and assistant principals who were directly involved in initiatives supporting student voice and student participation. Participants were recruited initially through purposive sampling and subsequently through professional referrals using a snowball recruitment strategy. This approach proved particularly valuable because school leaders often face demanding

professional responsibilities that limit their availability for research participation. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated substantially new insights or perspectives related to the research objectives.

Ethical considerations were integrated throughout every stage of the investigation. Institutional ethical approval was obtained before participant recruitment commenced, and all participants provided informed consent before interviews were conducted. Participation remained entirely voluntary, with individuals retaining the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. To safeguard confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed during transcription, and pseudonyms replaced participants' real names. References to schools, local communities, and any other identifiable information were omitted from the interview transcripts to preserve anonymity. Secure procedures were followed for storing interview data, ensuring compliance with recognised ethical standards governing educational research [8] (Table 1).

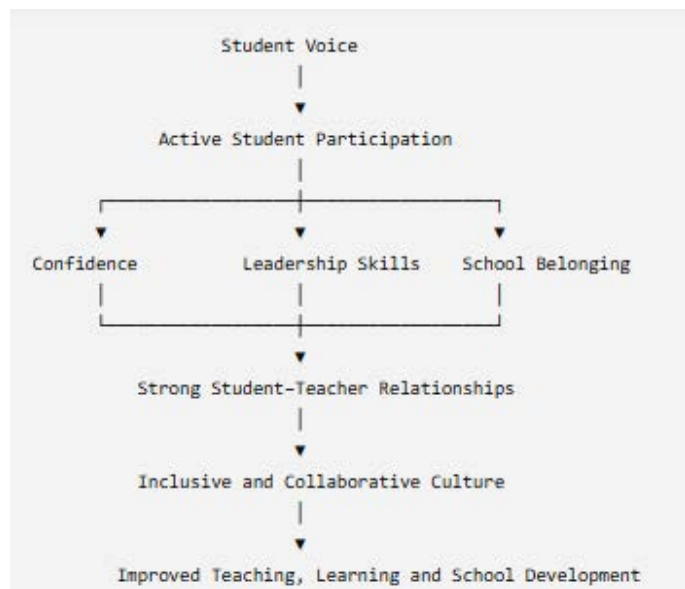
**Table 1:** Summary of Participant Characteristics.

| Characteristic       | Description                                                                                      |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Total participants   | 12 school leaders                                                                                |
| Gender distribution  | 9 Female; 3 Male                                                                                 |
| Leadership positions | Deputy Principals and Assistant Principals                                                       |
| School types         | Voluntary Secondary, ETB, Community and Comprehensive                                            |
| School locations     | Urban and Rural                                                                                  |
| School status        | DEIS and non-DEIS                                                                                |
| School structure     | Co-educational, Boys' schools, Girls' schools                                                    |
| Student enrolment    | Approximately 380–830 students                                                                   |
| Interview format     | 8 Online; 4 Face-to-face                                                                         |
| Sampling strategy    | Purposive followed by Snowball Sampling                                                          |
| Saturation point     | Achieved after completion of the tenth interview and confirmed through two additional interviews |

## RESULTS

The thematic analysis generated several interconnected themes that explain how school leaders perceive student voice and its contribution to school governance. Participants consistently recognised student participation as an important feature of inclusive educational leadership, although the extent to which it was embedded within school practice varied considerably across institutions. Three broad areas emerged from the analysis. The first related to the positive outcomes associated with student voice, the second focused on the leadership practices and organisational conditions that encourage meaningful participation, and the third highlighted the practical challenges that continue

to influence the implementation of participatory decision-making. Collectively, these themes demonstrate that student voice is viewed not simply as a consultation process but as an evolving leadership practice capable of strengthening relationships, improving school culture, and supporting continuous school development [9] (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Conceptual pathway illustrating how authentic student voice contributes to student development, inclusive school culture, and continuous school improvement.

### Positive Impacts of Student Voice

School leaders overwhelmingly described student voice as producing benefits that extend beyond individual learners to the wider school community. Participants explained that when students are invited to contribute their opinions and witness their ideas influencing school initiatives, they develop stronger confidence, greater self-worth, and a deeper sense of belonging. Active participation encouraged students to recognise themselves as valued members of the school community rather than passive recipients of educational decisions. Leaders also observed improvements in communication, responsibility, teamwork, and leadership capability, indicating that involvement in decision-making

contributes to both personal and social development. These experiences were viewed as essential for preparing young people to become responsible citizens capable of collaborative problem-solving and democratic participation [10] (Table 2).

The present study provides important insights into how school leaders perceive student voice as a fundamental element of inclusive education and collaborative school leadership. Overall, the findings demonstrate that educational leaders acknowledge the value of involving students in decisions that influence school life, recognising that meaningful participation contributes not only to individual student development but also to institutional improvement. Although participants consistently expressed positive attitudes towards student engagement, the extent to which these beliefs were translated into everyday leadership practices differed considerably across schools. This variation suggests that successful implementation depends less on school characteristics and more on leadership philosophy, organisational culture, and the willingness of school communities to embrace participatory approaches [11] (Table 3).

A major finding of the study is that authentic student participation contributes to multiple educational outcomes extending beyond traditional academic achievement. School leaders reported that students who actively contribute to school decision-making become more confident, responsible, and motivated to engage with their educational environment. Opportunities to express opinions and observe their ideas being implemented foster a stronger sense of ownership, belonging, and civic responsibility. These experiences also encourage the development of communication, leadership, and collaborative problem-solving skills that remain valuable beyond the school setting. Consequently, student voice should be viewed as an educational process that supports both personal growth and institutional effectiveness rather than simply a mechanism for collecting student opinions [12].

The findings further indicate that inclusive leadership is central to establishing environments where student

**Table 2:** Summary of the major educational benefits associated with authentic student voice in Irish post-primary schools.

| Theme                             | Description                                                                          | Observed Educational Outcome                                        |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Student Empowerment               | Students were encouraged to express opinions and participate in school matters.      | Greater confidence, ownership, and self-esteem.                     |
| Leadership Development            | Participation in committees and school activities strengthened leadership abilities. | Improved communication, teamwork, and responsibility.               |
| School Belonging                  | Students felt their contributions were recognised and valued.                        | Stronger sense of inclusion and school connectedness.               |
| Teaching and Learning Enhancement | Student feedback informed classroom practices and school improvement initiatives.    | More responsive learning environments and improved engagement.      |
| Inclusive School Culture          | Open communication between leaders and students promoted collaboration.              | Higher levels of trust, mutual respect, and shared decision-making. |

**Table 3:** Discussion of Major Findings and Their Educational Implications.

| Major Finding                                               | Interpretation                                                                                                                | Implications for Educational Practice                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Student voice promotes personal development                 | Participation strengthens confidence, responsibility, communication, and leadership skills among students.                    | Schools should integrate student participation into routine educational activities rather than limiting it to representative groups. |
| Inclusive leadership enables meaningful participation       | Leadership characterised by openness, collaboration, and trust encourages students to contribute confidently.                 | Professional development should prepare school leaders to adopt participatory leadership approaches.                                 |
| School culture determines participation quality             | Respectful relationships and transparent communication create conditions for authentic student engagement.                    | Schools should establish organisational cultures that value dialogue and shared responsibility.                                      |
| Student participation improves school improvement processes | Student feedback provides practical insights that support responsive policies and learning environments.                      | Student perspectives should be incorporated into school planning, wellbeing initiatives, and curriculum development.                 |
| Organisational barriers remain                              | Time limitations, unequal representation, competing priorities, and traditional leadership practices restrict implementation. | Schools require structured participation frameworks and clear guidance to ensure consistent practice across educational settings.    |

participation can flourish. Participants consistently associated successful student voice initiatives with leadership practices characterised by openness, trust, transparency, and mutual respect. School leaders who encouraged dialogue and actively engaged students in conversations about school improvement created stronger relationships between staff and learners while promoting a shared sense of responsibility. In contrast, schools operating within more hierarchical decision-making structures often provided fewer opportunities for meaningful student influence. These differences demonstrate that leadership style substantially shapes the quality of student participation and determines whether engagement becomes authentic or remains largely symbolic.

Another important observation emerging from the study concerns the role of school culture in sustaining participatory practices. Schools that fostered inclusive environments encouraged students to contribute through multiple formal and informal channels rather than relying exclusively on representative bodies. Such approaches enabled wider participation, strengthened trust, and reinforced the perception that student perspectives were respected within everyday school operations. Participants suggested that authentic participation requires continuous communication, supportive relationships, and consistent opportunities for students to influence decisions affecting learning, wellbeing, and school development. These findings indicate that inclusive cultures develop gradually through shared values and collaborative practices rather than isolated initiatives or occasional consultation exercises [13].

The study also highlights that meaningful student participation requires deliberate investment in leadership

development for both students and staff. Participants emphasised that students benefit from structured opportunities to strengthen communication skills, critical thinking, negotiation, and responsible decision-making before assuming participatory roles. Similarly, teachers and school leaders require professional learning that supports collaborative leadership, active listening, and effective facilitation of student engagement. Developing these complementary capacities can strengthen confidence among all stakeholders and improve the quality of interactions between students and educational leaders. Capacity building should therefore be considered an essential component of sustainable student voice initiatives rather than an optional addition to existing school programmes.

Despite widespread recognition of the value of student participation, several practical barriers continue to influence implementation. Participants described challenges associated with balancing competing administrative responsibilities, limited time for consultation, varying levels of student confidence, and concerns regarding the maturity of younger learners when contributing to complex decisions. Additional challenges included ensuring equitable representation across diverse student populations and managing expectations when student recommendations could not always be implemented. These findings suggest that schools require clear structures, transparent communication, and realistic participation processes that acknowledge both the opportunities and limitations of shared decision-making. Addressing these barriers may improve the credibility and long-term sustainability of participatory leadership practices [14].

The findings additionally reveal evidence of variation along a

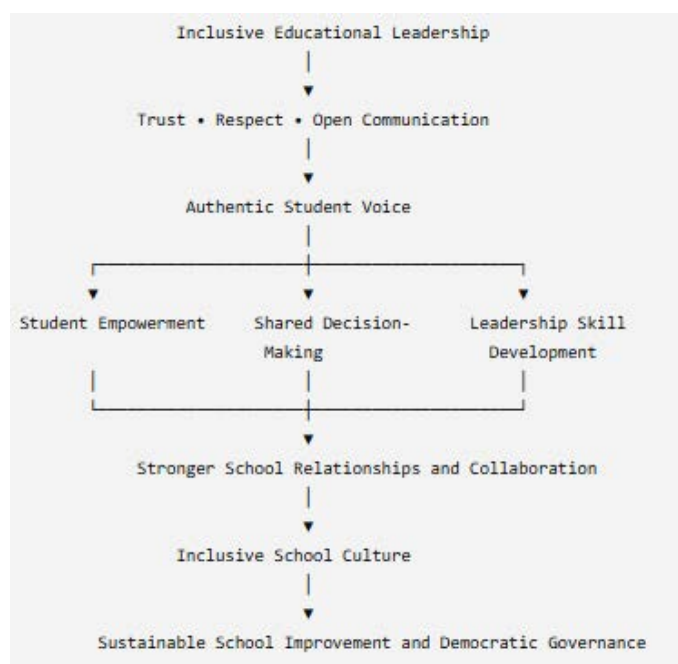
continuum ranging from symbolic consultation to authentic participation. In some schools, students contributed directly to discussions with senior leaders and observed tangible outcomes resulting from their involvement. In other settings, participation was largely restricted to advisory roles with limited influence over final decisions. This variation demonstrates that the existence of student councils or representative structures alone does not guarantee meaningful participation. Authentic student voice requires that learners are not only invited to express opinions but are also provided with opportunities to influence decisions, receive constructive feedback, and observe how their contributions shape school development. Without these elements, participation risks becoming procedural rather than genuinely collaborative.

From a policy perspective, the findings support the need for greater consistency in the implementation of student participation across post-primary education. National policies promoting inclusive education and democratic school governance should be accompanied by practical guidance that assists schools in translating policy principles into everyday leadership practice. Professional development programmes focusing on participatory leadership, collaborative governance, and inclusive decision-making may strengthen implementation while reducing variation between schools. Furthermore, establishing practical frameworks for evaluating student participation could help schools monitor progress and identify opportunities for continuous improvement [15].

## DISCUSSION

The present investigation assessed whether cord blood serum albumin could serve as a reliable early predictor of neonatal hyperbilirubinemia. Among the 50 neonates enrolled, 38% required phototherapy during the early neonatal period. Although a trend toward higher jaundice incidence was observed among neonates with lower albumin levels ( $<2.8$  g/dL), the association did not reach statistical significance ( $p > 0.05$ ). Furthermore, ROC analysis yielded an AUC of 0.5, suggesting that cord albumin, when used in isolation, has minimal discriminatory value in identifying neonates at risk [15].

These findings show partial agreement with the results of who reported that albumin concentrations below 2.8 g/dL increased the likelihood of hyperbilirubinemia and proposed  $\geq 3.4$  g/dL as a safe threshold for early discharge. Mishra and Naidu (2018) similarly documented a strong correlation between low cord albumin ( $\leq 2.8$  g/dL) and jaundice, with 95% of affected neonates falling within this albumin range. However, the lack of significance in our study may reflect the relatively small sample size and the limited variability in albumin values (2.8–3.3 g/dL), which could restrict the ability to detect meaningful differences [16] (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Conceptual framework illustrating how inclusive leadership and authentic student voice collectively contribute to collaborative school governance and continuous school improvement.

Conversely, our observations align more closely with those of who reported that although more than half of the neonates with albumin  $<2.8$  g/dL developed jaundice, the strength of association was insufficient to recommend albumin as a standalone predictor. However, demonstrated far greater diagnostic accuracy (AUC 0.876; sensitivity 69.4%; specificity 98.2%), indicating that significant inter-study variability exists. Differences in population characteristics, cutoff selection, laboratory methods, and sample size may explain these inconsistencies.

Moderate predictive performance has also been described by those who reported a sensitivity of 83% and specificity of 48%, suggesting that albumin may be more valuable as a supportive screening parameter. Similarly noted that albumin  $\leq 3.3$  g/dL was associated with higher risk, while levels above this threshold indicated relative safety [17].

Notably, our study identified birth weight as a more robust predictor of hyperbilirubinemia than albumin. Neonates who ultimately required phototherapy had significantly lower mean birth weights ( $p < 0.05$ ). This finding corresponds with results from Khairy et al. (2019), who emphasized that both low birth weight and albumin  $\leq 3.0$  g/dL increased vulnerability to bilirubin elevation [18].

Correlation analysis demonstrated weak negative relationships between albumin and bilirubin ( $r = -0.1$ ) as well as between birth weight and bilirubin ( $r = -0.2$ ). This pattern is consistent with who reported a negative correlation ( $r = -0.389$ ) between albumin concentration and total bilirubin levels, suggesting a physiological but modest association [19].

While several previous studies highlight cord serum albumin as a potentially valuable early marker, the present study indicates that its predictive ability is limited when used independently. Perinatal variables such as birth weight, gestational age, and clinical risk factors appear to play complementary and potentially more influential roles. Future research may consider combining cord albumin with parameters such as cord bilirubin or albumin-to-bilirubin ratio to enhance predictive performance [20].

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that meaningful student voice can strengthen inclusive leadership, improve educational decision-making, and enhance school life within Irish post-primary education. When students have authentic opportunities to influence decisions affecting their learning and school environment, they show greater engagement, stronger leadership skills, and a deeper sense of belonging. Student participation also supports collaboration, communication, and shared responsibility among students, teachers, and school leaders. The findings indicate that successful participation depends on leadership practices characterised by openness, trust, dialogue, and genuine collaboration. However, differences in leadership approaches, organisational structures, and institutional priorities create variation in how student voice is implemented. Sustainable participation therefore requires coordinated involvement from school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and policymakers. Clear institutional frameworks, professional development, and structured participation mechanisms are essential for embedding student voice within everyday school governance. Despite the study's relatively small qualitative sample, it provides valuable insights into participatory leadership across diverse school contexts. Future policy should promote coherent national guidance, leadership training, and collaborative decision-making strategies. Ultimately, embedding authentic student participation can contribute to more responsive, equitable, democratic, and learner-centred educational communities.

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