

The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum: The Benefits and challenges of Transforming Learner Voice into Policy Change

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum (NFLF). It uses the NFLF as an example of learner voice in practice, retracing the history of the NFLF as a means of reflecting on some of the benefits and challenges of bringing learner voice into public policy. The article outlines educational debates on learner voice processes alongside public policy debates around the role of qualitative data in decision-making processes to expose the differing perspectives on what learner voice processes should look like. It explores how these debates have shaped the NFLF and addresses what this has meant to learner voice in Irish FET.

Keywords: Learner voice, educational theory, public policy, National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (NFLF), AONTAS [The National Adult Learning Organisation], SOLAS [The Further Education and Training Authority], Further Education and Training (FET), and Education and Training Boards (ETBs)

Introduction

The National FET Learner Forum (NFLF) began in 2016 as a one-day national event where learners could share their voice and reflect on ways to improve the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. Today the NFLF consists of a series of sixteen regional events organised in partnership with Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across Ireland. Over the course of its three years, the NFLF has seen significant expansion in both its size and impact, however, in the background of these developments have been conflicting views on how the NFLF should progress a learner voice agenda. These differing perspectives have largely come from the two worlds which the NFLF straddles: the world of

educational theory and the world of public policy. This article uses the NFLF to reflect on some of the challenges faced in bringing these two worlds together and moving forward in a way that protects the authenticity of learner voice and the best interests of the learner.

The NFLF developed directly from the Objective 3.1 of the FET Strategy, which envisioned a FET policy that responded ‘to the need of learners’ by ‘systematically benchmarking learner’s views and satisfaction with their FET programme’ (SOLAS, 2014, p. 137). This objective required learner views to be captured through both large-scale programme surveys and through a series of learner fora. Based on AONTAS’ position as the organisation leading learner voice initiatives in FET, it was tasked by SOLAS to deliver a learner forum piece of this objective.

AONTAS set about developing the forum that aligned with its belief that learners should be at the heart of all processes in FET. For AONTAS, learner voice was about moving toward a more democratic and inclusive FET system. To achieve this aim, AONTAS believed the NFLF must provide a safe space for learners to voluntarily share their voices, ensure its methods and practices are inclusive, and contain feedback structures that allow policy makers to respond to learner needs. These beliefs developed directly from a wide selection of educational theory on learner voice. AONTAS saw the NFLF as a way to bring some of these theories into practice in Irish FET.

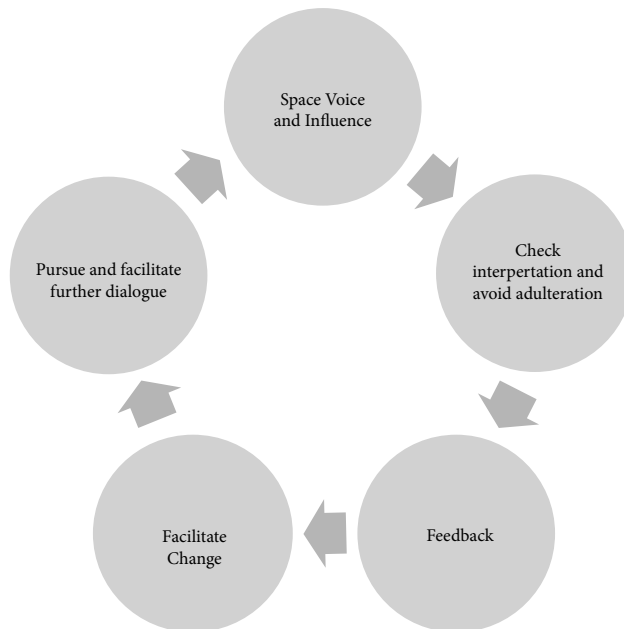
Learner Voice Theory and Methods

Learner voice has a rich and well-developed discourse within educational circles, however, it was ‘the new wave of student voice’ from the 1990s that has largely shaped modern day concepts of learner voice processes (Fielding, 2010). One of the initial forces behind the resurrection of learner voice is British researcher Michael Fielding. His vision of learner voice was one that reimagined the school and the classroom as a more egalitarian and democratic space. For Fielding, learner voice processes necessitated a rupture from traditional approaches to education and a radical reconstruction of the teacher-student relationship aimed at developing a more egalitarian learning culture (Fielding, 2004). The emphasis on a cultural change was important because its manifestation meant that transformation had to move beyond the classroom space, and into the institutional and policy realm.

In the beginning, many organisations like Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (SPARQS, 2016), Soundout in the United States (Soundout, 2002) and Futurelab in England (Rudd *et al.*, 2006) focused on developing learner voice processes in established spaces, such as the classroom or the school, and as a result emphasised the importance of relationships between administrators, teachers, and learners. This left many questions open about how to employ these principles at the national level. In a number of places, efforts were made to use traditional representative models that placed learners on public boards and allocated space to learners in policy discussions. However, these actions espoused criticism from those who believed these models ignored power structures in place that restricted learner voice and that these models prevented assurances that a diversity of learner voices was heard (Logan and Walker, 2008, p. 11). This did not mean representative models did not have a place in learner voice processes, rather that they should be used in conjunction with other broader forms of engagement. Futurelab, for instance, outlined a series of processes that could be implemented to improve learner voice structures, pointing to surveys, fora, and student councils as tools that could be used to capture learner voice (Rudd *et al.*, 2006, pp.16–18). Futurelab also reiterated the importance of ensuring each of these tools was employed with the focus inclusivity as the underlining outlook of these developments (*ibid.*).

Even with these more comprehensive approaches in place, a number of advocates still raised concerns about the potential of policy makers and administrators to use learner voice solely as ‘a tokenistic gesture’ without any desire to enact meaningful change based on the feedback gathered through these processes (Robison and Taylor, 2007, p. 5). In her work on inclusive practices for children’s voices as based on the United Nations Rights of the Child, Laura Lundy addressed this very issue (Lundy, 2007). According to Lundy, ‘voice was not enough’. Instead policy makers had to ensure voice was given the space it needed to be shared without constraint, facilitated in a meaningful way, given the appropriate audience, and acted upon before it could be considered effective (TUSLA, 2015, p. 5). The focus then became closing the loop. One of the clearest examples of this is seen in Paula Flynn’s learner voice framework, as featured in Figure 1, where she outlines a clear step-by-step process that not only ensures learner voices will be heard, but also develops a sustainable feedback structure where schools can continue to build upon the learner voice work in place (Flynn, 2017, p. 30).

Figure 1. Flynn’s Transformative Dialogue (Flynn, 2017, p. 30)



Despite these advances, a number of learner voice advocates remain sceptical of any successful learner voice models working in today’s world. For them, the current neoliberal educational climate prevents learner voice from being enacted in a meaningful way. For them learner voice is the antithesis to neoliberalism and therefore any political embrace of the concept must mean that learner voice has been corrupted (Seale, 2010, p. 997). Researcher Nick Zepke, on the other hand, explains how neoliberalism and learner voice, two seemingly incongruous concepts, grew alongside each other through an ‘elective affinity’ whereby learner engagement fulfils neoliberal desires for ‘measurable accountability processes’ (Zepke, 2015, pp. 695–6). Zepke’s explanation seemed to support those who argued that policy makers were attempting to quantify learner voice in order to provide an alternative data set to measure against their expansive quantitative data.

Many, including Fielding, feared the long-term implications of this systematic approach to learner voice. Fielding argued that these efforts were an attempt to manipulate learner voice, thereby fitting it into pre-existing vocabularies and structures that allowed the system to maintain its traditional power structures (Fielding, 2004, p. 296). In essence, it was not ‘the rupture’ he had called for,

instead it was symptomatic of the troubling hierarchal approach to education that poised learners as objects of policy and pedagogy rather than partners in the educational process.

These critiques raise some important questions about learner voice processes and more importantly showcase the diversity of opinions on exactly what learner voice processes should be. AONTAS went into the project being very aware of these debates and the potential challenges that would lie ahead. Nevertheless, AONTAS maintained that the benefits of expanding learner voice processes in FET outweighed arguments that cooperation with government bodies could damage learner voice processes. AONTAS believes that all good educational policy must include mechanisms that engage a diverse range of learners, particularly those who experience education disadvantage. The NFLF provided a way to do this and, as such, offered a potential to create a FET system that was more responsive to learner needs. It would be the duty of AONTAS to resist attempts to systematically quantify learner voice, but it would also be its obligation to deliver a NFLF that promoted the wider benefits of learner voice in Irish FET.

Learner Voice and Policy Work

AONTAS has always maintained that its ultimate responsibility is to the learners who share their experience, stories and recommendations at NFLF events. Adult learners are very often those who have experienced structural inequalities, negative past educational experiences and challenging circumstances associated with poverty. The NFLF is not about hearing the loudest voice, but instead it is about providing a space for the voices which are the least often heard at the policy table. Our goal is not only to ensure that learners feel welcomed, but that those least likely to share their views are heard in a meaningful way, and also that policy action at local and national level is made. The challenge of moving from learner recommendations to national policy influence has been a learning process over the project.

This challenge, of course, is not a new one and has been faced by a number of organisations who have worked in the area of learner voice before. A number of researchers have pointed out that some policy makers seem to lack the impetus to use learner voice for change because they are unable to accept qualitative data, while others blame the problem on the very concept of learner voice itself (Moore and Muller in Arnot and Reay, 2007, p. 315). This latter group has even argued that too many conclusions are drawn from learner voice without

a 'rigorous methodology in place' going as far as to even suggest that it be abandoned altogether in favour of traditional large-scale quantitative studies (*ibid.*).

There is an element of this debate in the shadow of the NFLF. Indeed, one could ascribe some of the challenges the NFLF has faced in advancing learner recommendations to the qualitative nature of the project. This approach is seen by some as problematic, due to a perceived lack of replicability, lack of representative sample in quantitative terms and overall dominance of quantitative data-informed policy. However, qualitative research findings can facilitate a deeper analysis of an education context, draw out the learner voice, and delve deeper into the learner experience highlighting solutions and recommendations. Qualitative research supports the voice that is unheard as it seeks to understand complex environments and has real value in terms of describing the lived experience of the issues facing learners to policy makers. Additionally, the recommendations are, by their very nature, not clear-cut; a possible strength in that: 'good qualitative research is meant to provoke conversations and debate rather than proffer a conclusion served as a *fait accompli*' (Tierney and Clemens, 2011, p. 99). The NFLF offers a deeper analysis, and helpfully not only a statement of policy issues but also policy recommendations that can further complement the extensive FET data available. One of the strongest arguments for qualitative research, and its range of influence on policy, is cited by Rist (1994) and incorporates other considerations including the intended and unintended consequences of a policy approach; 'policy makers have no equally grounded means of learning about program impacts and outcomes as they do with qualitative research findings' (Rist, 1994, p. 632). Yet, the dominance of notions around 'robust' data stem from the legacy of the positivist tradition that attributes a higher truth value to quantitative data; a difficult barrier to overcome when advocating for policy change.

However, that is not to say that the NFLF has had limited policy impact, in fact findings from the NFLF 2017 were included in the *Progress Review of the FET Strategy* (SOLAS, 2018). At a recent 2018 conference organised by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the National Forum for Teaching and Learning, SOLAS' Executive Director of Strategy and Knowledge, Andrew Brownlee, presented the recommendations from regional NFLF events that linked directly to improvements in FET implemented at the local level.

Furthermore, internationally there is a shift towards qualitative data and learner/citizen engagement as a legitimate basis for public policy change. For example, in the United States, the Centre for Public Impact offers focus-group style ‘people panels’ as a data source for international governments to better understand ‘issues affecting people’s lives and the role that government can play to address these’ (Centre for Public Impact, 2019). Interestingly, the methods they employ are arguably not as comprehensive as the qualitative research of the NFLF as they use a smaller sample size, yet they are seen a viable mode for policy influence. At the recent World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, discussions at a workshop for inclusion centred on the need for ‘keeping people at the centre’ for people to be part of creating solutions to issues that impact them. Also, at the recent European Commission Directorate-General for Education, Youth, and Sport and Culture’s conference on the Forum on the Future of Learning (January, 2019), again the importance of learner voice featured strongly at its Inclusion and Citizenship workshop. Supporting student success and inclusion by listening to the learner voice at all levels of the education experience is increasingly becoming a recognised norm for good practice.

AONTAS sees a large part of its role as ensuring that policy makers continually embrace these values. The NFLF is moving toward the normalisation of learner consultation in FET policy. While there may be differing opinions on how this should be done and even a reluctance toward qualitative data held by some, the NFLF has ensured that learner voice is regularly discussed at the policy table and celebrated publicly. It has become a tangible example of how learner voice is something that can no longer be ignored in FET.

The Evolution of the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum (NFLF)

When AONTAS first designed the NFLF, it made great efforts to ensure it would meet the needs of all those impacted by the project. In 2015 before the NFLF began, AONTAS hosted a Learner Engagement Seminar that brought together policy makers, academics, practitioners, and learners to discuss learner voice methods used across the FET sector. The seminar identified best practices and developed a series of recommendations on how to deliver an effective and meaningful NFLF (AONTAS, 2015). To ensure learners and stakeholders remained the drivers of the project, there were two groups established to inform the development of the NFLF: a learner focus group and an advisory group. Later these groups merged to establish one advisory group that would assist in shaping the development of the NFLF.

The first ever event took place on 26 February 2016 in the Mansion House, Dublin. It brought together 70 learners who were participating in SOLAS-funded FET courses. Each learner was nominated by their Education and Training Board (ETB) to attend. At the event, learners participated in round table focus groups led by facilitators. Facilitators guided the discussions with the following questions:

- Question 1: What is working well in FET?
- Question 2: What is not working well in FET and how can it be improved?

Note takers and facilitators recorded highlights of the discussion. Feedback was collated and developed into the 2016 NALF Policy Report, which highlighted key findings and recommendations to influence future policy decisions at the national level (AONTAS, 2016).

This process garnered some criticisms from policy makers who felt that one national event with 70 learners was simply not enough. Others expressed concern over the nomination process suggesting that ETBs could simply select particular learners who met their own individual agenda needs. Policy makers asked that a larger number of learners be brought into these discussions to ensure recommendations were more reflective of the wider FET body and from a more diverse group of learners. While there was no universal message on exactly how many learners would need to participate to make recommendations valid, there was general agreement that the NFLF could be expanded. In 2017, AONTAS sought to do just this.

In April 2017, the NFLF held one national event with 90 learners and an additional three regional events with 154 learners. The total reach in 2017 increased by 263% from the previous year. The national event maintained the celebratory atmosphere of the 2016 national event with a mix of stakeholders, guest speakers and learners each attending the event. Learners were broken up into discussion groups of 10–15 participants, with an effort made to ensure each group had diverse FET programme representation. As the NFLF remained a partnership programme with SOLAS, it was agreed that results from the national event would remain internal, with a larger national report developed after regional meetings were held.

Three ETBs (Cork, Galway and Roscommon, and Tipperary) offered to pilot the first regional events. Each participating ETB held one half day event that

included two discussion sessions. Each group was led by a facilitator who posed the same questions used at the national event. On a recommendation from the advisory group, AONTAS also piloted a survey to learners at the regional events. Questions developed on the survey came from members of the group, with SOLAS and AONTAS agreeing to a final version. The questions on the surveys were based on topics raised by learners at the two previous national events. Topics included: transportation, tutor availability, FET advertisement, and finding information. The information gathered through the regional events was analysed and shared alongside the findings of the national event in the 2017 *National Further Education and Training Learner Forum Advisory Report* (AONTAS, 2017).

One of the greatest strengths going into the planning of 2018 was the success of the regional events. ETBs welcomed the opportunity to bring learners together from across programmes in their area to hear about learners' experiences. They encouraged AONTAS to move ahead with this development, taking on a greater role as partners in the delivery of the NFLF. ETBs also welcomed feedback, seeing NFLF reports as effective tools to implementing change at a local level. ETBs praised regional events for the role they played in developing a sense of community within the ETB. This sentiment was shared by learners whose reflections on regional events said that they 'now realise how much interest is taken in adult learners'. When describing what they enjoyed most about the NFLF regional events, learners highlighted 'hearing different comments from people with different backgrounds' and 'how everybody was given the opportunity to give their point of view'. One participant even cited the regional NFLF event as an important opportunity to hear about other courses offered in his/her ETB, promising to progress from his/her current course to an apprenticeship as a result of meeting other learners at the event.

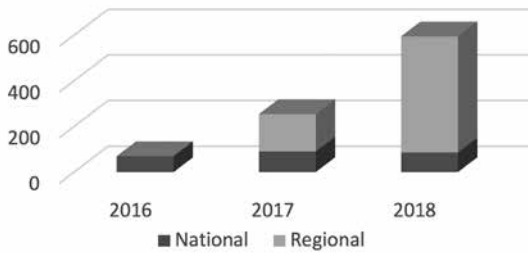
AONTAS committed to moving ahead with the regionalisation of the NFLF, seeing this as the most effective way to ensure the NFLF was having an immediate impact on policy at a local level. It set an ambitious growth plan that called for nine regional events and one national event, which would reach approximately 600 learners. Despite these efforts, there were still challenges. Some still argued that more representation needed to come from full-time FET programmes, where FET investment was the highest. To address these concerns, and on recommendation from the Advisory Group, two regional events were held in training centres to attract more full-time learners.

The regionalisation of events has also transformed the nomination process. ETBs reached out to tutors to promote NFLF events. In turn, tutors brought along whole classes to events. In total over the course of the year regional events yielded a total of 56 hours of recorded learner conversations. Once discussions were finished, learners then filled out the same questionnaires and evaluations as used in the national event. In 2018, the NFLF compiled survey responses from 556 learners across FET. Each participating ETB received an internal report, detailing key results from their regional event. Key findings from all regional reports will also be merged with findings from the national event to produce a 2019 Advisory Report in May.

To espouse national change, it became increasingly evident that more work would still have to be done. AONTAS decided to take two key actions: commission an evaluation of the NFLF to date and establish an Academic Expert Group to devise a solid intellectual framework to the project. The Academic Expert Group drew on expertise from across Europe thus broadening the perspectives shaping AONTAS' learner voice engagement. The hope was that by opening the NFLF up to outside guidance and critique, AONTAS would have an even stronger case that the NFLF's methodology was robust and based on solid intellectual framework. AONTAS also wanted to use the opportunity to bring the academic and policy worlds together for the betterment of the project. At the 2018 national event the Academic Expert Group and key policy makers came together in two policy discussions that explored the issues of best practice in learner voice.

Over the last three years, AONTAS has worked tirelessly delivering and expanding on their task of amplifying learners' voices. As you can see from Figure 2 below, the NFLF has continued to reach more and more learners at a national and regional level to ensure SOLAS and all other stakeholders can hear the voices of FET learners across Ireland.

Figure 2. National FET Learner Forum Participation



Since its formation, the NFLF has been guided and overseen by 12 Advisory Group meetings and five Academic Expert Group meetings. The NFLF has engaged 919 full-time and part-time learners across 17 SOLAS-funded programmes over the course of the project. Learners from each of the 16 ETBs have been reached through a regional or a national event. 673 learners have participated in 12 regional events and 246 learners have participated in three national events. At a sample of 2018 NFLF events, learners were given the option to answer a series of demographic questions. As you can see from figures 3-6 featured below, learners came from diverse groups.

Figure 3. NFLF 2018: Age Representation

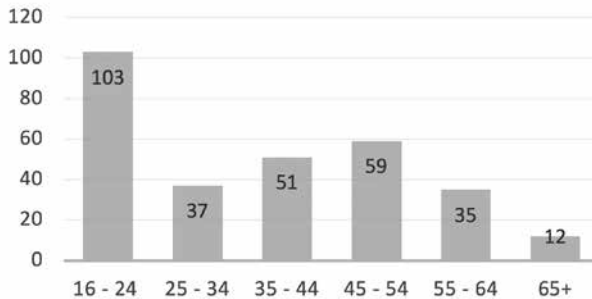


Figure 4. NFLF: Gender Representation

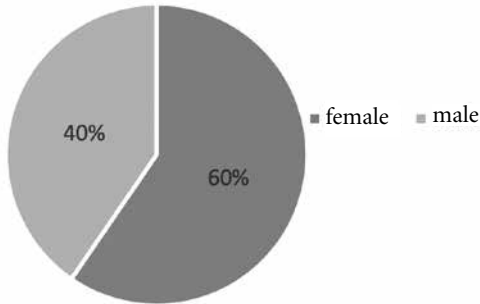


Figure 5. NFLF 2018: Racial Identity Representation

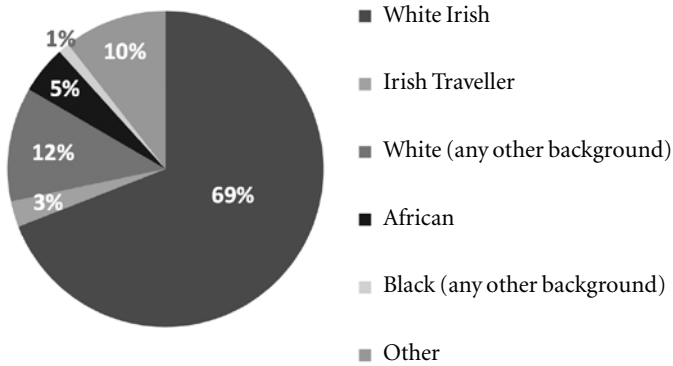
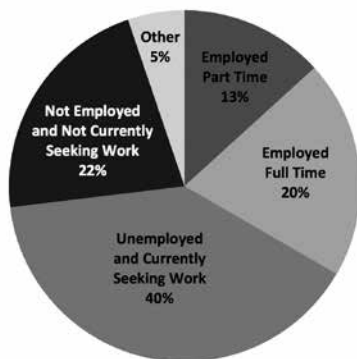


Figure 6. NFLF 2018: Employment Status Representation



Conclusion: Learner voice in the policy world

The NFLF does not claim to be a solution to all learner voice processes in FET, rather it is a critical piece to a much broader transformation taking place. For the first time, learner voice processes are being included within policy reviews and assessment of government bodies. Learners' opinions cannot simply be ignored or omitted from policy discussions. Their voice is seen as an essential component to policy development. Through the NFLF, FET learners are being listened to by policy makers and administrators at a local, regional, and national level. Is it the radical educational transformation that some learner voice advocates envisioned? No, but it is certainly an improvement upon the top-down policy processes that were in place before and this should be something to celebrate.

The most important opinion of the work of the NFLF comes from the learners. When asked about whether the NFLF is a valuable exercise, learners continuously say 'yes.' In unpublished survey responses from the 2018 NFLF events recording reasons why they enjoyed the event learners have stated, 'I most enjoy the fact that we could speak openly about our courses'; 'I feel like I have been heard'; 'I enjoyed the chance to be able to voice my opinion and views'; and 'there should be more events like this.' AONTAS has always asserted that the NFLF's greatest strength comes from its ability to engage the voices of learners who are not traditionally heard in alternative formal structures. In fact, of the 490 learners who were asked at regional events if they had ever been asked to speak about their experiences in FET, 60% responded 'no.' This is a testament to the NFLF's unique capacity to include those who have largely remained voiceless in other current FET structures and would most likely remain unheard if alternative representative models had been used in its place.

While AONTAS should and is currently planning to expand its learner voice processes throughout FET and continue to move toward the transformative learner voice processes that advocates originally envisioned, it is important to recognise and celebrate the unique milestones achieved by the NFLF to date. The NFLF has opened a dialogue between policy makers and academics, it has developed a process that is informed by the perspectives of both worlds, and it has adapted to the suggestions from both fronts in an effort to move toward a collaborative approach going forward. This should be seen as a valuable exercise because it offers hope that change is possible and that some compromises should be welcome as long as they move us closer to improving the educational experience for learners.