Applying Solution Focused Approaches as a participatory method to amplify student voice in a Higher Education context.

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Abstract

This paper reports an evaluation of the application of participatory method Solution Focused Approaches (SFA) to develop student voice within a HE setting. The work of Seale (2010; 2015; 2016) and their call to 'amplify' student voice processes through the trialing of participatory methods was responded to. SFA was positioned as a participatory method that would allow for students to be treated as equal partners in student voice processes. The research evaluation gathered qualitative data through focus groups with staff (course leads) and student representatives (course reps). Thematic analysis was used to develop five themes; *SFA is active and involved, relationships are important, student apathy and disengagement from feedback, course rep experience,* and *feedback systems.* The research was instigated due to difficulties with meaningful collaboration that existed within student voice work and has proceeded to provide a potential solution to those problems. Outcomes are discussed in light of recommendations for further research and HE practice.

Key words

Student voice, participatory methods, Solution Focused Approaches, student partnership, student participation, student empowerment

Introduction

Student Voice (SV) can be defined as any attempt to represent and utilise the opinions of students to promote change in Higher Educational (HE) practices. This paper reports a research project that sought to 'amplify' (Seale, 2016) SV in a School of Education department in a HE establishment through application of Solution Focused Approaches (SFA). To attempt to 'amplify' is to adapt SV processes so that traditional power imbalances are redistributed from HE professionals to students. As a result of 'amplification', SV has a more meaningful and influential role in the development of educational practice (Seale, 2016). Within the department the existing course rep role, where students are elected by each degree cohort to represent SV, was reported by both staff and students to have not worked as well as it could. Two identified reasons for this were that course reps could lack full engagement with the role or feel that their voice was not sufficiently 'heard'.

Based on the work of Seale (2010, 2015,2016) and the call for the development and evaluation of participatory methods for SV, SFA were applied to enhance the course rep role and 'amplify' SV. The SV literature's call for evaluation of participatory methods for SV is outlined below along with a rationale for why SFA were chosen to meet this call.

Two agendas in student voice work

From the late 1990s, SV research has followed a trajectory away from simple elicitation of student's views to improve teaching standards towards a complex conceptualisation of students as equal collaborators in educational practice (Cook-Sather, 2014). Seale, Gibson, Haynes, and Potter (2015) argue that this movement has been more rhetorical than representative of real change, with the SV and student engagement academic literature demonstrating limited theorization of both these concepts (Seale et al., 2015). As such, definitions of SV vary and can be critiqued for a fuzziness resultant of differing agendas for engagement in SV work.

Two dominant agendas for engaging in SV work can be outlined. Often reported within the SV literature is an acknowledgement and critique of a neoliberal, students-as-consumers agenda pitched against a students-as-partners progressive agenda (Canning, 2017; Carey, 2013; Cook-Sather, 2014; Hall, 2017; Lensmire, 1998; Nixon, Brooman, Murphy, & Fearon, 2017; Seale, 2010; Seale et al., 2015; Seale, 2016; Taylor & Robinson, 2009). In the former, SV is collated to evaluate teaching practice to improve educational services in a HE environment subjected to market forces. This is argued to have been entwined with the development of evaluation practices such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and HE league tables (Canning, 2017). SV is said to have become an object that can be measured to gain insights as part of an educational enhancement process (Hall, 2017; Nixon et al., 2017). This provides HE institutions with a "currency" to promote the University to prospective students, developing a competitive edge in the market (Canning, 2017).

With the students-as-partners agenda SV is not engaged with as a form of consumer feedback to improve services. The students-as-consumers agenda is positioned as focusing on data collection as a tick box exercise, rather than promoting a purposeful and meaningful dialogue between students and staff (Carey, 2013). It is critiqued for bolstering the status quo of institutional systems and social inequalities inherent in them (Taylor & Robinson, 2009). The voices of the traditionally marginalized are said to continue to be oppressed as "the passive individual becomes whatever is dictated by an overpowering social context" (Lensmire, 1998, p.267).

The students-as-partners agenda seeks to re-address power imbalances, giving tangible influence to students through SV processes chosen for their participatory values (Seale, 2010; Seale, 2016). Participatory processes involve handing power back to students by further involving them in the actions taken as a result of listening to their views. Canning (2017) goes so far as to promote the term 'student voices' instead of SV as reference to the array of 'voices' emerging from different marginalised groups and the influence that they should have.

Research into SV work adopting the students-as-partners agenda has reported some positive outcomes. For example, when applied to curriculum design, lecturers found themselves becoming more open to criticism and recognising weaknesses, as well as student attendance and academic performance being reported to improve (Brooman, Darwent & Pilmore, 2015). However, as a prominent academic in the SV literature, Seale (2015) has noted that the majority of research is descriptive rather than evaluative which "serves to reinforce a picture of an under-developed field" (Seale, 2015, p.547). Seale (2016) calls for a need to further 'amplify' SV through initiatives that seek to evaluate tools for forging meaningful partnerships with students. One important focus being the need to equip students with the interpersonal skills required for successful partnership working, as an absence of these skills has been acknowledged to cause students to disengage and lack ownership in the partnership process (Seale et al., 2015).

Empowering students in the students-as-partners role

A closer look at the wider SV / pupil representation literature highlights 'empowerment' of students as a key theme (Ashcroft, 1987; Broom, 2015; Boomer, 1982; Kreisberg, 1992; Sullivan, 2002;). The student empowerment literature dates from the 1980s and the work of Boomer (1982) who called for teachers to move from a traditional 'top down' model of power, where students are micromanaged, to a model of power characterised by students increasingly taking responsibility for their learning. Similarly, Ashcroft (1987) positioned the role of student empowerment in education as an educational philosophy, rather than relating to a specific set of practices.

Kreisberg (1992) developed a model of student empowerment which considered power influences from various perspectives. *Power over* is a traditional form of power in the

educational space where one group, the educators, have dominance over the other group of students / pupils (Kreisberg, 1992). *Power with* is a progressive form of power in the educational space where power imbalances are addressed, and some power is passed to students / pupils. Sullivan (2002) classifies both these forms of power as *interpersonal* which means that students must pursue personal goals that are not in conflict with peers or educators. Sullivan (2002) also outlined a second dimension in the empowerment of students relating to *power to* which is where an individual believes they have the capability to act independently of others. This dimension is termed *intrapersonal* (Sullivan, 2002).

Intrapersonal empowerment of students allows them to set their own social and achievement goals and have a meaningful say in the agenda for how these are achieved (Sullivan, 2002; Sullivan & Heron, 2020). Broom (2015) argues that such an approach seeks to empower students to enhance education as a democratic process. As such, empowerment is closely linked to developing the self-efficacy and agency of students (Broom, 2015; Sullivan, 2002; Sullivan & Heron, 2020).

These interrelated conceptualisations of power and student empowerment have clear implications for implementing a students-as-partners perspective in HE. Arguably, HE educators need to move beyond simplistic notions of SV involvement where feedback is viewed as a means to develop HE as a paid-for service. This would fit the *interpersonal, power to* and even *power with* model. If students-as-partners is adopted and implemented in a deliberate and purposeful way, then it will potentially allow for the *intrapersonal* empowerment of students via a *power to* model. SFA are put forward as one method through which this may be achieved.

Solution focused approaches

SFA developed from a wider application of Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT). First outlined by de Shazer (1985), SFBT is a short-term psychotheraputic intervention that is goal focused. The central premise is that clients should be supported to set goals and develop plans to achieve them (de Shazer & Berg, 1997; O'Connell, 2012). Through this process clients seek solutions to their problems, rather than focusing on the problem analysis inherent in some other therapeutic traditions (De Shazer & Berg, 1997; O'Connell, 2012). As with person-centred counselling, the belief that clients have the ability to solve their own problems is strongly advocated for (De Shazer & Berg, 1997; O'Connell, 2012). In addition, Seale (2016) highlights how the pupil voice literature is an important reference point for developing SV. SFA is a participatory approach that has been used to support understanding of both pupil and student voice (Messiou, 2006; Harding & Atkinson, 2009; Ingram, 2013; Maxwell, 2015; Sewell, 2016).

SFA adopt the key premises of solution generation through goal setting and strength development and applies them to improve practice and systemic processes in a

specified context (Redpath & Hacker, 1999). There is no set technique or procedure to be followed (Simm & Ingram, 2006). Emphasis is placed on the two premises of goal setting and solution generation from a strengths perspective. Solutions are reached through consultation techniques such as 'solution conversations' where participants are supported to generate their own resolutions to problems through open ended questioning (O'Connell, 2003). For example, Simm and Ingram (2006) sought to improve Special Educational Needs and Disability systems in primary schools by using solution focused conversations to support teachers to find solutions to difficult situations with a class or pupil, develop positive relationships between pupils and improve Individual Education Plan provision.

The application of SFA have experienced popularity in the field of applied educational psychology, applied to enhance effective teaching practice and school systems (Rhodes, 1993; Rhodes & Ajaml, 1995; Redpath & Harker, 1999; Ajmal & Rees, 2001; Black, Harrison, Lee , Marshall & Willaim, 2003; Burns & Hulusi, 2005; Simm & Ingram, 2008; Alexander & Sked, 2010; Morgan, 2016; Edmondson & Howe, 2019). It has also been trialled with specialist populations, such as improving services for those with learning disabilities (Carrick & Randle-Phillips, 2018). However, in a review of SFA Stobie, Boyle and Woolfson (2005) reported that whilst many claims of effectiveness were made there were few evaluation studies of the approach.

SFA emphasis on goal setting and actions taken to achieve goals aligns with Sullivan's (2002) and Sullivan and Heron's (2020) conceptualization of *intrapersonal empowerment* occurring when students have increased input in the social and academic goals and agenda they set for themselves (*power to).* Therefore, application of SFA is one such way to facilitate *intrapersonal empowerment* of students via their joint involvement in goal setting and agendas within HE, those which seek to find solutions for positive outcomes. This also renders the relationship between SFA and students-as-partners explicit. If SFA empowers students to take an equal role in establishing desired educational outcomes and process then they have been true partners as power imbalances have been redressed through the application of SFA. This is supported by Broom (2015) who explains that "empowered individuals can consider varied perspectives, negotiate with others, amend policies as needed as they can think independently"(2015, p.81). These are skills the application of SFA aim to develop in those involved (de Shazer, 1985; de Shazer & Berg, 1997).

Research objectives

The project adopted SFA as a problem-solving approach to respond to the issue of amplification of SV from a students-as-partners perspective (Seale, 2016). SFA were chosen as relevant for this purpose. The research objectives were as follows:

- Amplify SV by applying SFA to enhance the course rep role so that it is participatory.

- Evaluate the impact of SFA as a participatory method for student voice.

Method

Project funding: Students as Academic Partners Project

The project was funded by an internal funding call at the HE institution. The Students as Academic Partners (SAP) funding call allocated £1000 to research projects that sought to enhance the student experience. This allowed for the principle investigator, an academic in the School of Education, to fund two undergraduate students to work on the research evaluation. They were equally involved with every aspect of the project from conception, data collection, data analysis and dissemination. As such, the SAP funding enabled the SV value of equal participation to also be embedded into the research evaluation; research done *with* students rather than research done *to* students.

Design

An inductive exploratory design was chosen as the research sought to evaluate the impact of SFA as a participatory method for SV. A qualitative methodology was adopted as it would yield data relevant to the exploratory function of the chosen research design (Willig, 2013). The design and methodology were positioned as best fitting an epistemological and ontological position of critical realism.

Critical realism puts forth the ontological assumption that there is a real world independent of the human construction of it, but that this assumption cannot be proved or disproved (Sayer, 1992). What is known about the 'real' world is only a reflection of it based on epistemic statements (Sayer, 1992).

Participants

Purposive sampling enabled the recruitment of participants who had been closely involved with the application of SFA to the course rep role. Participants were five course reps, one school rep who had previously been a course rep and two course leads, all from the School of Education in the HE institution where the project took place.

The course reps and school rep were all undergraduate students who had held the course rep or school rep role for an academic year. Two were in the first year of their degree, two were in their second year and two were final year students. Three were female and Three were male. They were either course reps for one of two degrees, the titles of which are not named here to maintain confidentiality. Two were mature students (conceptualised as over the age of 21). There was an additional course rep who had

also actioned the application of SFA in the role but had declined to take part in the research evaluation section of the project.

The course leads were both female lecturers for the two degrees (again, degree titles not named here for confidentiality reasons). One had been lecturing for nine years and had been course lead for four years. The second have been lecturing for three years and had been course lead for one year.

Context

The research took place in a department in a School of Education in a HE institution in the UK. The department ran 4 undergraduate degrees in Education, and a Masters degree which was not included in the research. Each year group for the undergraduate degrees had their own course rep, comprising 12 course reps in total. They served approximately 320 students.

Procedure: Solution focused approaches

SFA were applied to the course rep role in several ways to ensure that the ethos of the approach was embedded into the student feedback system.

(1) Before practice strategies related to SFA were implemented the ethos of students-as-partners was adopted. This was conceptualised as movement towards course reps becoming more equally involved in not just the generation of student feedback but its interpretation and in changes made as a result. Ethos adoption was characterised though practical changes to how course reps were worked with (explored below). Prior to this, the student feedback system had no explicitly stated ethos or conceptualisation of what SV was. The system was simple with course reps collecting feedback and then reporting this to staff at course management meetings. Staff would then feed back to course reps about any changes and require them to communicate these to students.

The new ethos of students-as-partners and adoption of SFA as a way to achieve this were communicated to course reps and course leads by the creation of a 'Course Rep Handbook' that outlined the ethos of the course rep system. They were communicated to students through a verbal presentation during induction week at the start of the academic year.

(2) At the beginning of the academic year course reps took part in a two-hour training session. During this training they were introduced to SFA and received training in interpersonal skills related to SFA such as basic listening skills, how to ask constructive questions to support solution discovery and methods for holding solution focused meetings.

(3) In consultation with course reps a proforma for seeking student opinions was developed to be solution focused. The proforma consisted of a matrix with a space for students to share things that were going well with the course, solutions to past problems that had been effective, current problems and any ideas for solutions to these problems.

(4) Course reps accessed one-to-one meetings with the SAP project lead where they were coached in developing solutions by including others.

(5) Course rep clinics were held twice a semester. These were meetings attended by course reps and course leads and the SAP project coordinator. During course rep clinics SFA methods were utilised to facilitate joint problem-solving between staff and students leading to solution generation. For example, a solution circle was used each meeting. A solution circle is a 20-minute problem-solving activity divided into four equal quadrants of time (Kauffeld & Meyers, 2009). The problem holder first speaks about the problem and other group members are quiet. The problem holder is then quiet and other group members ask clarifying questions and generate solutions. In the next phase all members can talk, and an action plan is generated. The remaining time is used to create 'next steps' for all involved to ensure that the plan is acted upon.

Meeting topics for SFA problem-solving were chosen based on recent student feedback and any matters that were deemed most pressing. Topics were chosen and agreed by both course reps and course leads. For example, before one session student feedback had consistently focused on how students from two different courses who shared a couple of modules were not working well together. As such, the solution circle focused on ways to generate positive feelings between students from different courses. Outcomes of the SFA problem-solving were fed back to students by both course reps and course leads. This mostly happened verbally at the start of lectures, but was often supported by written feedback including emails and each course's newsletter.

(6) Solutions generated through the above processes were acted upon and fed back to course reps who in turn reported to students how problems had been solved.

Data collection

Qualitative data was collected via three focus groups. Focus groups with course reps were done separately from course leads as questions were adapted to their specific roles. Due to the nature of the two roles, separate focus groups enabled participants to speak openly with those who held a similar role without feeling pressure to express a certain viewpoint. The first focus group consisted of three course reps the second of two course reps and the third of two course leads.

Focus groups lasted between one hour to an hour and ten minutes. They were audio recorded and then transcribed. Whilst pre-written open-ended questions were formulated going into the focus groups, time was also allowed for additional questions

throughout, should the discussions go in an interesting direction relevant to the research question. Focus group questions are attached in Appendix ‘one.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis as it offers a “theoretically flexible” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.2) approach to analysing qualitative data. An inductive approach to coding focus group data was taken, in which data was coded line by line. This method was chosen as it complemented the inductive exploratory research design and its exploratory nature. Codes were developed independently by the three members of the research team and then combined to ensure saturation of the data.

Researchers worked together to develop initial themes from codes by combining codes that shared commonalities. This process was then repeated as a way of interrogating the data to form new themes or confirm the usefulness and cogent nature of existing themes. In this stage themes were checked to ensure homogeneity and that there was heterogeneity between each theme. This ensured that they were distinct. Themes developed from the second round of analysis were later reviewed to create subthemes within them. The final step of analysis involved constructing a thematic map (Appendix One) which showed links between the various themes.

Ethics

Ethical clearance for the research was given by the University of Worcester’s research ethical board.

Findings and discussion

The analysis led to the identification of five themes: SFA is active and involved, relationships are important, student apathy and disengagement from feedback, course rep experience, and feedback systems. As shown in the thematic map (Appendix One) each theme consisted of subthemes. Themes are presented and discussed below.

SFA is active and involved

All participants spoke positively of SFA, positioning it as a practice that lead to actions being taken as a result of the effective problem-solving it enabled. Participant four and Participant five, who were course leads, directly alluded to a near constant utilisation of solutions:

Participant four: So, we are constantly trying to change things in response to all the feedback we get within the constraints of what we've got...we are on it all the time

*Participant five: and we are trying to find solutions *laughs**

Course reps echoed this, for example participant one distinguishes between feedback that leads to no change and the 'actual' change resultant of SFA:

Participant one: Umm yeh so but well from first year when I was the course rep I feel like I did more of actual changing than rather than just passing feedback on and overseeing

Likewise, both course leads and course reps agreed that it was good to involve course reps as representatives of students in solution generation. The following extract is an example of a course rep stating that it is useful to involve students in SFA:

Participant two: It's not just a problem we need a solution

Interviewer: So, they're [students] more involved with it?

Participant two: So, they're actually putting solutions across or one student might come up with a problem, but another student might have the solution

Interviewer: I see

Another example of this is Participant five, a course lead, reflecting on how their course had experienced *"quite a bumpy road, it's been a bit turbulent over the course in the last 3 years*" but involving students in solution generation was *"how to facilitate problem-solving and things. I can definitely see a shift in that this year."*

Participants also presented SFA as a practice that involved a time commitment to ensure that it was effective.

Relationships are important

An overwhelming number of participants positioned relationships as important in the student feedback process and supportive of joint problem-solving. It was felt that SFA had developed a team feeling, aptly demonstrated in the following exchange:

Participant one: Urm and it's good to like see the tutors and like they like actually appreciate you and the student voice

Participant three: And I think generally the university value you more so you've got the course rep conference and student union meetings, so I think you're really part of the team as it were rather than just [a] title

Interviewer: Right, so you feel like part of the lecturing team?

Participant three: Yeh so

Interviewer: The university team?

Participant three: Part of the actual uni team

Important in the generation of this team feeling were reduced power dynamics where course reps were equal to course leads in the student voice process. For example, Participant three reported that:

Participant three: it just makes you feel more valued... and the role actually matters it's not just a piece of paper on a name or a name on a piece of paper (laughter)

It was this notion of being valued, appreciated and respected that repeatedly appeared in the data as an indicator of how reduced power dynamics were achieved, as exemplified by Participant one:

Participant one: ... they like appreciate you being that person and then yeh I think going to the meetings like higher up meetings helped the relationship because they like respect you the student voice not just like a student but I mean it just happened naturally I didn't do anything to you know please them or whatever

The positive relationships established through a team feeling and reduced power imbalances were viewed by participants as enabling joint problem-solving to both occur and be effective. For example, Participant four, a course lead, stated that:

Participant four: as much as they want to speak to us, its really the same for any students whether a rep or not as much as they want to communicate we will listen, and we will erm work with them to find a solution for issues. So that's all our practice anyway whether it's a course rep or not.

Student apathy and disengagement from feedback

Somewhat in contrast to the themes of *SFA is active and involved* and *relationships are important,* participants also indicated that students could be apathetic towards giving feedback and sometimes disengage from it entirely. Course reps reported students indicating fatigue at regularly being asked for feedback by speaking of the role involving *"chasing people around"* (participant two), *"actually getting feedback is quite a challenge"* (participant three), *"too much feedback going on"* (participant one) and it *"just always being about feedback"* (participant one).

One of the reasons apparent in the data for this 'feedback fatigue' was students not caring about finding solutions. There was a sense that students are not concerned beyond what is immediately happening for them, as indicated by participant two and participant three:

Participant two: Outside the classroom they don't want to know

Participant three: A lot goes on behind the scenes that some students don't necessarily see or realise happens

Another reason given for student disengagement from the feedback process, and in particular SFA, is that some problems just don't have solutions. If a solution can't be found a student may be disinclined to further engage with the SV process. A dominant example of this was car parking on campus, for example:

Participant three: I often get a lot of comments saying can you do so and so about car parking (laughing)… Just more emphasis really [that it can't be changed]

Lastly, there was a consensus that whether SV processes were felt to be tokenistic or meaningful influenced the extent to which students would engage. If SV approaches were participatory and more than a 'tick box' exercise then it was felt that students engaged more. Participant three shows this in their statement:

Participant three: So, it's a lot more, voice matters, rather than how sort of things happen

Course rep experience

The fourth theme constructed from the thematic analysis process was concerned with the experience of being a course rep. The role of course rep was positioned as sometimes being challenging and a negative experience as demonstrated in the following extract:

Participant one: Yeh I mean it's harder than I thought it was gonna be

Interviewer: Okay

Participant one: Just umm getting like getting responses and being the school rep trying to organise everyone is like hard and getting attendance at meetings and stuff yeh

Interviewer: Sure

Participant one: Is way harder than I expected it

Participant two: I concur with that, it's very difficult

Participant one: Urmm I mean yeh I didn't think it would be as hard, for me being third year now it's time consuming for me because I've got so much going on

In addition to the reasons given above, course reps believed that personality and prior work experience could mediate some of the challenges of the role. It was added that further training was required to also improve readiness for and experience of the role. For example, participant five speaks of those who *"hadn't done the training, so they brought a lot, a bullet point list of negative things".*

Feedback systems

The final theme was concerned with the practical feedback systems used to relate feedback to staff and then back to students. Students felt that speed and frequency of feedback were essential to a well-functioning system and described a somewhat clunky channel of communication:

Participant two: They go to top management back down to middle management back to us

Social media and technology were posited as useful for ensuring faster and more frequent feedback:

Participant three: Maybe having like a department social media page or something so rather than wait until lectures or emails, because a lot of students don't check emails, the notification will come through on their phone saying this was your feedback this is what we've done

It was felt that methods such as these would increase the visibility of course reps which was also seen as a critical factor in a functioning, pragmatic feedback system.

Interpretation of findings considering implications for Student Voice practices in Higher Education

The research sought to explore the perceived effect of SFA as a participatory method for amplifying SV (Seale, 2016). The idiosyncratic nature of the thematic findings suggests that the adoption of participatory methods will look different in each HE institution. In the current research context, the theme of *SFA is active and involved* indicates that students deliberately participated in the new SV processes, thus leading to positive outcomes. When this is evaluated with consideration of the theme *feedback systems,* one interpretation is that SFA did successfully amplify student voice as students were perceived as equally involved and their involvement led to meaningful change.

However, the revelation of the theme *student apathy and disengagement from feedback* can tentatively be interpreted one of two ways. The first is that its presence is an indication that even with the application of participatory methods such as SFA, the amplification of SV still needs to respond to the challenge of student motivation. The alternative view is that the application of participatory approaches such as SFA will potentially support students to overcome the stubborn effect of 'feedback fatigue' through meaningful and equal involvement. Given the prominence of the theme *relationships are important* the current interpretation of the findings leans towards the latter as it appeared participants felt that SFA fostered positive and meaningful interactions as a part of SV processes, a potential antidote to disengagement.

As such, further adoption of SFA and other participatory methods of students-as-partners in SV work is advisable. This will need to consider the unique situation in each HE context as the current findings demonstrate that a range of perspectives can emerge as a result of a deliberate change in SV practices. This indicates that the use and evaluation of participatory methods is not linear, leading to clear outcomes for SV. Reflexive application of participatory methods with ongoing student led evaluation and HE practitioner reflection is advised.

Another consideration in the attempt to amplify SV through the application of SFA as a participatory method was the need to support course rep's interpersonal skill development. The importance of this need was apparent in the theme *course rep experience.* Being a representative of SV presented challenges and the reflection that

prior work experience helped and the call for further training highlighted that such roles, and the professional social interactions they offer, require ongoing student skill development. The detail of this theme indicates that SFA was perhaps not enough to provide this. Future explorations of participatory methods for SV would benefit from prior planning to support students in how to socially engage effectively with SV processes. As a result of this theme, the School of Education in which the research was carried out is planning to incorporate further interpersonal skills practice into initial role training as well as refresher training halfway through the academic year.

A final reflection is the appropriateness of the adoption of a problem-solving approach such as SFA to address the issue of amplifying SV work in HE through evaluation of participatory processes. The initial, but tentative, success of SFA in the current context provides some emerging evidence that the field and its problem-solving theories are relevant and advantageous to this task. This could be further expanded through continued application and evaluation of SFA or exploration of other participatory approaches or theories. Examples of relevant theories would be narrative psychology approaches and frameworks that apply social constructionist principles.

SFA and empowerment

As previously discussed, SFA was deemed an appropriate method for empowering students-as-partners as its application focuses on allowing stakeholders to have an input on chosen goals and then plan for how these goals can be achieved (de Shazer, 1985; de Shazer & Berg, 1997). This aligns with the conceptualisation of *intrapersonal power*, via a *power to* effect, as within this model students are empowered by being given meaningful input into choosing and developing their social and academic goals and agenda (Sullivan, 2002; Sullivan & Heron, 2020).

One theme that spoke directly to this was *SFA is active and involved.* The theme indicated that course reps felt that SV had not just been listened to, but led to action that they had a part in directing. It appears that there was an interpretation that SFA allowed for joint goals to be set and equal participation in the agenda for how these goals would be met (Sullivan, 2002; Sullivan & Heron, 2020). This indicates that SFA enabled course reps to develop a sense of agency. Agency is the belief that one has a degree of control over one's life and what happens around them (Jayakumar, 2012; Broom, 2015). It is implicated in empowerment as it leads a student to attempt to make positive changes in their environment (Jayakumar, 2012; Broom, 2015). The implication of agency arising from SFA is that course reps, on behalf of their students, were empowered by the application of the method as it was a process through which they could actively direct their learning and educational experience.

A second theme that could be interpreted as supporting the application of SFA as empowering SV is *Relationships are important.* To aim for an *intrapersonal* form of empowerment rather than an *interpersonal* form requires positive relationships to be

built (Nichols, 2006; Nichols & Zhang, 2011). Most notably, trust plays a significant role (Nichols, 2006). Trust can enhance the empowerment of students as it makes them aware of their own abilities to make decisions (Nichols, 2006). As such, that SFA allowed a *team feeling* and *positive relationships* to be formed arguably was a key factor in empowering students.

However, the sub-theme of *Speed and frequency of feedback* and *Being a course rep can be a negative experience* demonstrate that it cannot be fully claimed that SFA potentially empowered students. Course reps reported negative experiences and highlighted that if feedback is not responded to quickly then trust diminishes. From this, it is important to derive that the application of SFA itself does not automatically empower students. Close attention needs to be paid to the finer details of SV process to enable greater empowerment. One reflection on these not so positive findings is that trust is a flexible apparatus which can be challenged if the students-as-partners process is not implemented at each stage of the SV process.

Research strengths, limitations and recommendations

The research project can be positioned as pilot practitioner research as the overall objective was to evaluate preliminary practice changes. As such, it was small scale to allow initial evaluation and reflection before further action be taken. An obvious draw back to this is that it limits significance of the findings and generalisation to other contexts. Further research should seek scaling up of the application and evaluation of SFA as a participatory method for SV. Likewise, an interpretivist, qualitative approach to evaluation was chosen which also confers limitations. Future research may consider a mixed methods approach to widen analysis options. For example, direct or indirect measurement of course rep's interpersonal skills, via either observation or use of standardized questionnaire, would allow for quantitative analysis to confirm any perceptions of positive impact.

It is also important to note the specific research context of the School of Education. The course leads who took part arguably were already open to participatory methods for SV due their professional backgrounds in education; a field already concerned with promoting marginalised voices such as Voice of the Child or parental perceptions (Messiou, 2006; Harding & Atkinson, 2009; Ingram, 2013; Maxwell, 2015; Sewell, 2016). This could have potentially accounted for some degree of influence for the success of SFA. Further research should explore different contexts for the introduction of participatory methods.

The research project explored the perceptions of students by holding a focus group with course reps who represented the student body. Whilst this adequately generated data that could be analysed to explore student perceptions in the evaluation of SFA for SV processes, arguably this could have been expanded upon. One way this could have been achieved would have been to run a focus group with students who weren't course

reps. The SV research presented here is currently being expanded upon in a second research iteration and an attempt to gain a wider grasp of student perspectives will be implemented.

Whilst the research has demonstrated that SFA may be an appropriate method for amplifying SV processes in HE, it is important to acknowledge the scope for this. The contained context of the current project meant that changes to SV processes were satisfactorily implemented as one course rep coordinator was supporting four course leads and twelve course reps. This was a relatively good size team to track implementation. On a larger scale, organisational structures and processes could impinge its application. As such, SFA is currently recommendable for adoption within small to medium sized departments or schools within HE institutions. Further exploration is required before SFA can be recommended on a larger scale, such as institution wide

Conclusion

The research evaluated the adoption SFA as a participatory method to 'amplify' student voice processes in a School of Education in a HE institution (Seale, 2016). This was positioned as taking a students-as-partners agenda as opposed to a students-as-consumers agenda. The findings showed that SFA was positioned as 'good' as it involved students and led to solutions. Inherent in this process was the importance of positive relationships as part of participatory SV processes. Concern was also shown by participants about the course rep experience and influence of feedback systems. However, that students could be apathetic towards SV processes and disengage from feedback systems was clearly present in the data. In conclusion, with further research SFA may present a viable participatory method for amplifying SV. Other problem-solving methods are also worth exploring, such as restorative practice

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Appendix One: Thematic map