NEEDS
Negotiating the Essentials
for Education in Democratic Societies

"What's a Student Council?"

Initial Findings in Student-led Negotiated
Curriculum for Democratic Education through
NEEDS: Negotiating the Essentials for Education
in Democratic Societies.

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ESAI Conference 2025

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09/04/2025

Overview

- What is NEEDS?
- Negotiated, Integrated Curriculum
- Conceptual Framework
- Methods
- Initial Findings
- Contact
- Questions & References

What is NEEDS?

What is NEEDS?

Research Questions:

1. What are the affordances of **Negotiated Integrated Curriculum** for **Global Citizenship Education** (GCE) *through* Democracy?

2. What are the affordances of this student-led curriculum for **Student Voice, Participation, Self-Direction, Wellbeing** and **Agency**?

- Support **sustained, authentic engagement**

- Empower students to **negotiate meaningful learning** with their teachers

- Co-construct a pathway towards **Democratic Education**

NEEDS will utilize **Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC)** and space provided by Short Courses in the formal Junior Cycle curriculum to achieve this.
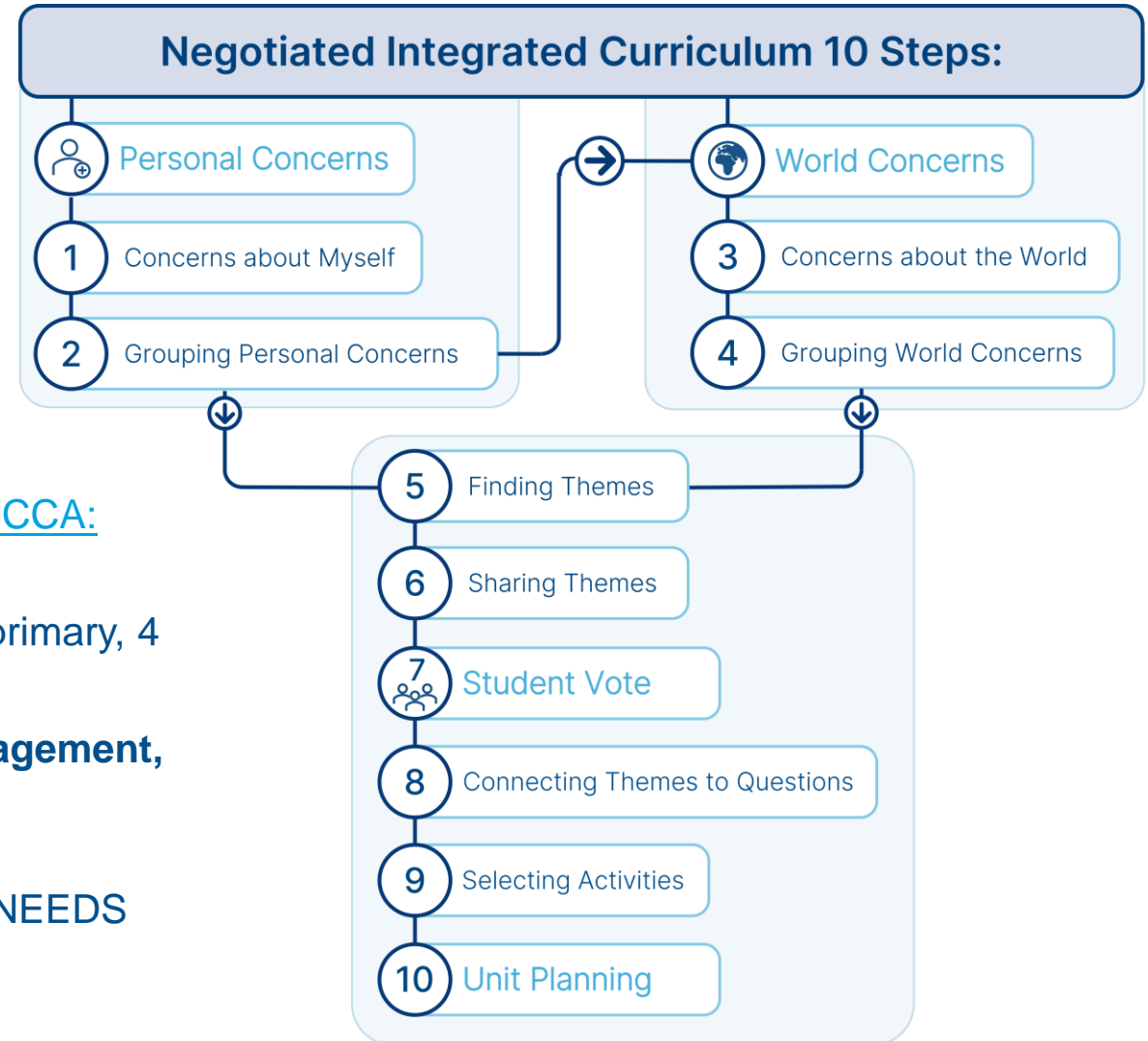
Negotiated, Integrated Curriculum

Negotiated What?

Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) is a 10-step process whereby students and teachers co-construct curriculum based on students' personal and global concerns, placing student voice at the centre of curriculum making.

- Builds on previous work ([NCCA: Student Voice,](#) [NCCA: Negotiating Curriculum](#))

- Conducted in 7 schools in the Limerick region (3 primary, 4 secondary)

- Found to have a positive impact on **Student Engagement, Agency** and **Meaningful Learning**

- This 10-step process will form the beginning of a NEEDS **Negotiated Learning Short Course (NLSC)**

Negotiated Integrated Curriculum 10 Steps:

Personal Concerns
1. Concerns about Myself
2. Grouping Personal Concerns

World Concerns
3. Concerns about the World
4. Grouping World Concerns

5. Finding Themes
6. Sharing Themes
7. Student Vote
8. Connecting Themes to Questions
9. Selecting Activities
10. Unit Planning

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The Benefits of A Negotiated Approach

NCCA Videos – Experiences with NIC

- [Video: School's Experiences of working with NIC](#)

- [Video: Active Learning with NIC](#)

Experiences with Democratic Education and NIC

"I went into it with my eyes closed. I thought: they are only 12, what are they going to know? But I find now as a teacher we don't give them enough benefit for the knowledge they have" – Susanne Browne, Teacher

"*One Student, One Vote: Democracy at Work in the Classroom*" ([The Irish Times](#), 2015).

Conceptual framework

Conceptualizing Voice, Participation & Agency

- Student Voice[1]
  - Can be *tokenistic*
  - Speaking for others
  - Lack of substantive influence
  - Lack of authentic voice

- Student Participation[2,3]
  - Lack of authentic participation
  - Lack of meaning = lack of motivation

- Giving students voice and choice in how they learn
  - Ownership of curriculum and ownership of learning[3]
  - Importance of Agency
  - Voice is dynamic, going beyond expression of opinion and choice[1]
  - Active engagement, voice As participation, changing wellbeing & self-direction
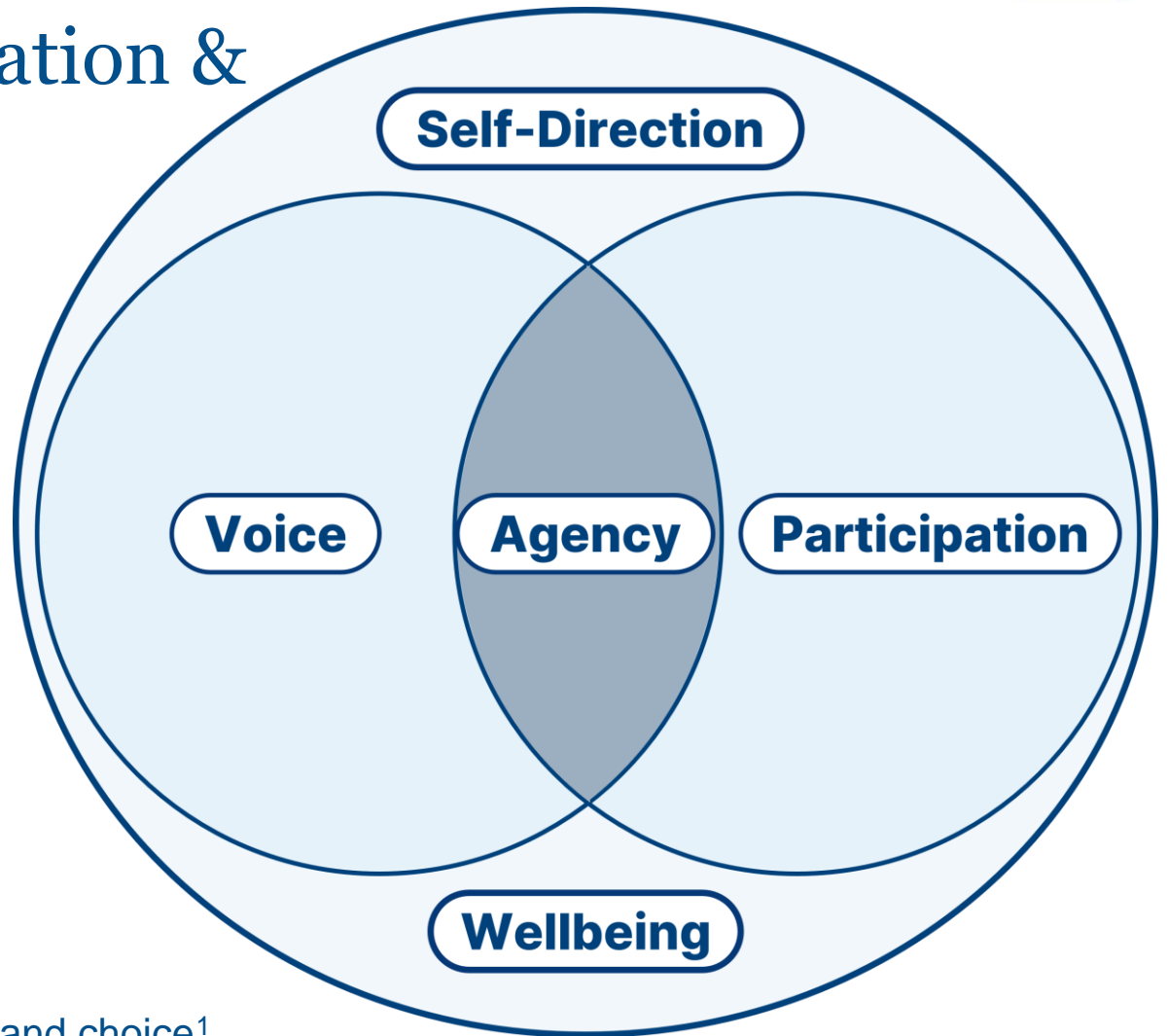
Conceptualizing Voice, Participation & Agency

- Reciprocal causality between Structure and Agency[3], and between Voice, Participation and Agency
- Agency is something one **does**, not something one **has**[4]
  - Moderated by environment (discursive, social, material)
  - Teacher Agency also moderated by Iterational, Practical/Evaluative, Projective dimensions (past, present, future)
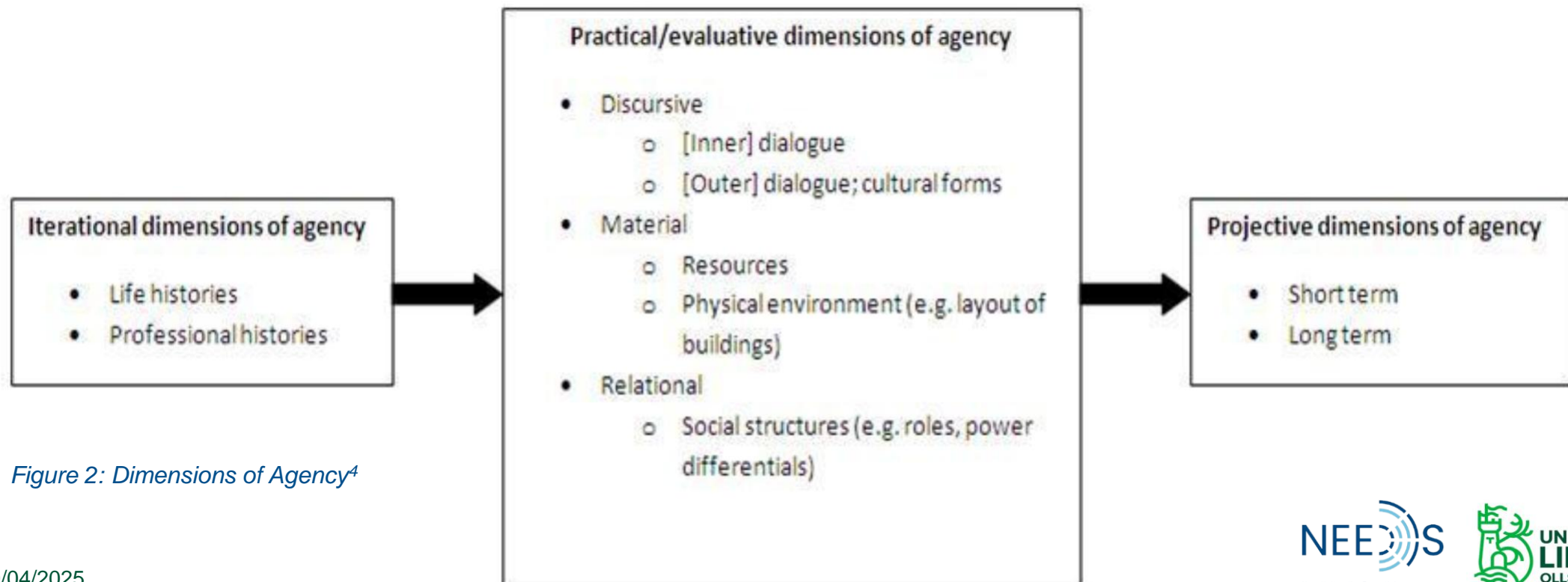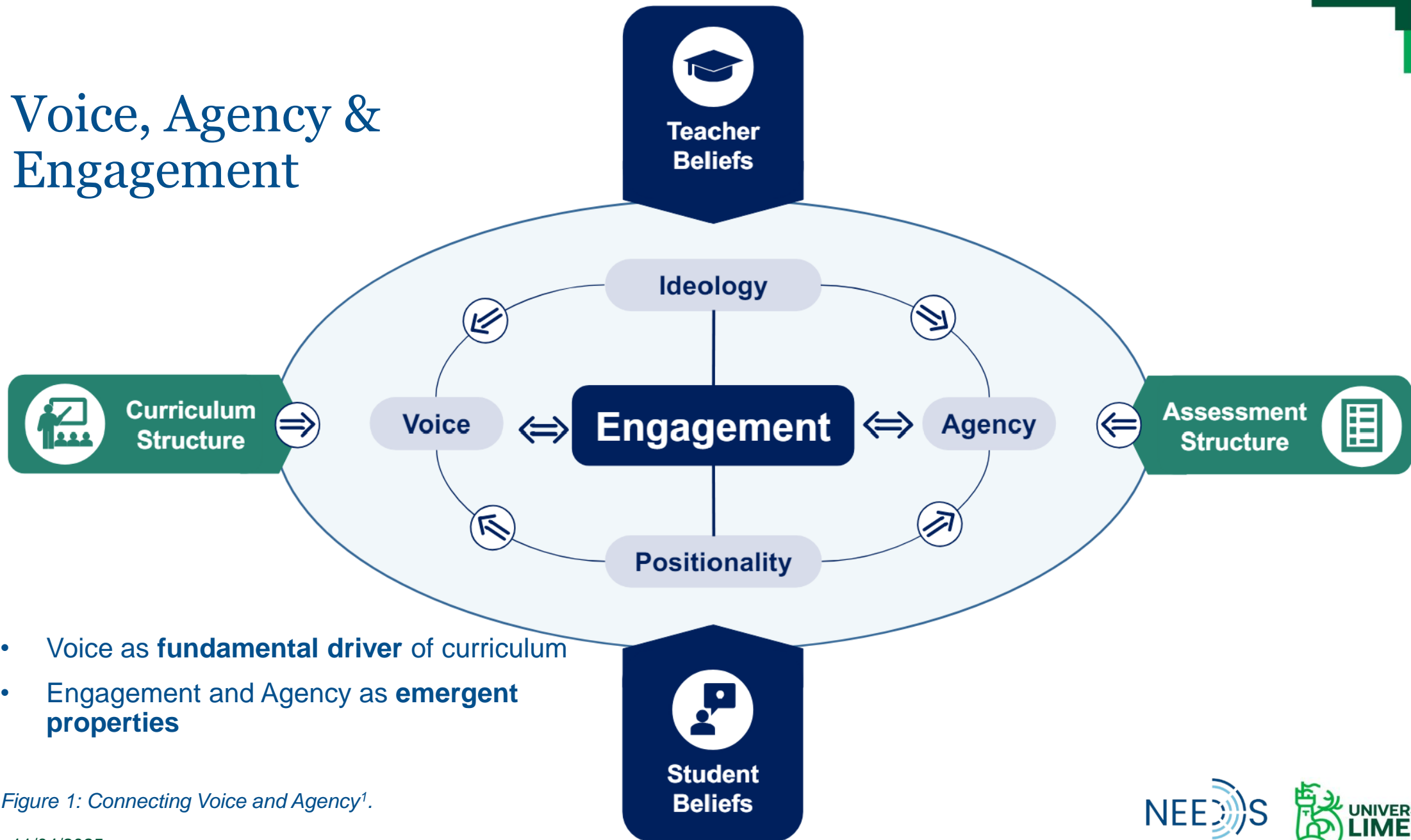
Practical/evaluative dimensions of agency

- Discursive
  - [Inner] dialogue
  - [Outer] dialogue; cultural forms
- Material
  - Resources
  - Physical environment (e.g. layout of buildings)
- Relational
  - Social structures (e.g. roles, power differentials)

Iterational dimensions of agency

- Life histories
- Professional histories

Projective dimensions of agency

- Short term
- Long term

Figure 2: Dimensions of Agency[4]

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Voice, Agency & Engagement

Figure 1: Connecting Voice and Agency[1].

- Voice as **fundamental driver** of curriculum
- Engagement and Agency as **emergent properties**

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Negotiated, Integrated Curriculum in NEEDS

- **Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC)** is a 10-step process whereby students and teachers co-construct curriculum based on students' personal and global concerns, placing student voice at the centre of curriculum making.

- NEEDS utilizes NIC and 100hrs of **unhurried time**[5] in the formal Junior Cycle Short Course curriculum
    - Engaging in an empirical, evidence-based study
    - Affordances of NIC for Global Citizenship Education (GCE)
    - 4 different Irish post-primary schools (1-3 teachers per school)
    - Over the 3 years of Junior Cycle

- NEEDS adopts a dual methodological approach, drawing on educational change theory to enable this.

# NEEDS Socio-Ecological Approach[6,7]
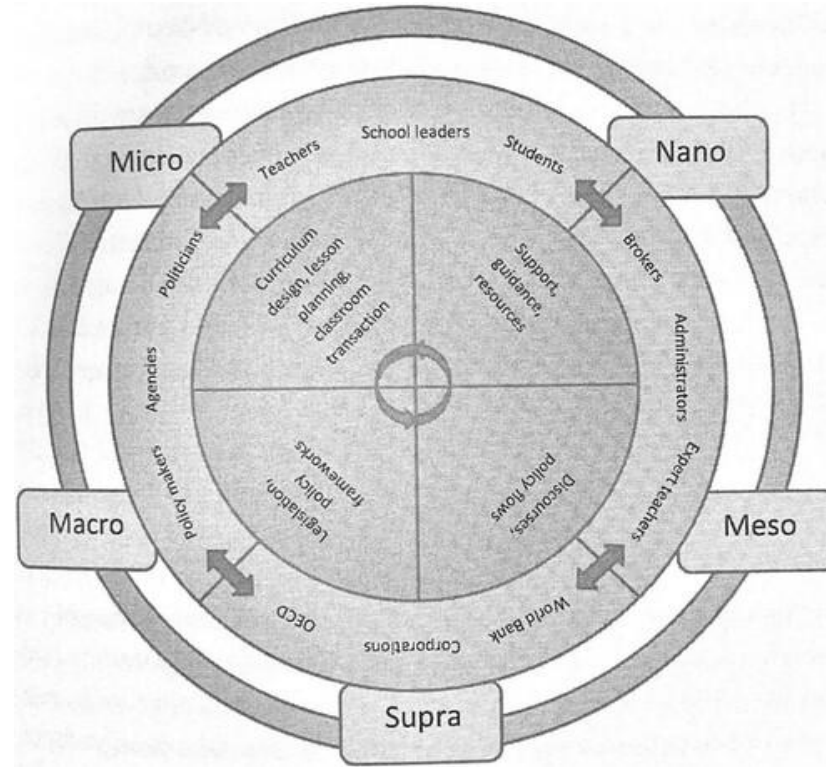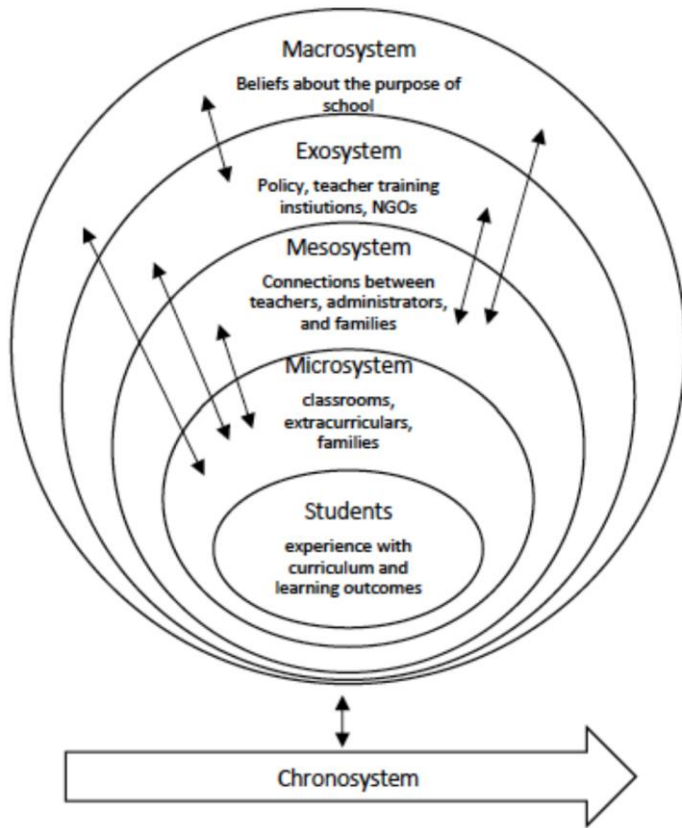
- PLC developed though engagement with NCCA, NAPD, WWGS, ACCS

- Linking with Oide, ETB and JMB

- 2-Day **NEEDS Professional Development Workshop** bringing teachers together, co-delivered with WWGS

- All actors have a shared purpose and goals

[6] Taguma, M. and M. Barrera, OECD future of education and skills 2030: Curriculum analysis. Disponibile su: https://www. oecd. org/education/2030-project/teaching-andlearning/learning/skills/Skills_for_2030. pdf, 2019.

[7] Priestley, M., Alvunger, D., Philippou, S. and Soini, T. eds., 2021. Curriculum making in Europe: Policy and practice within and across diverse contexts Available: https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-83867-735-020211001/full/html

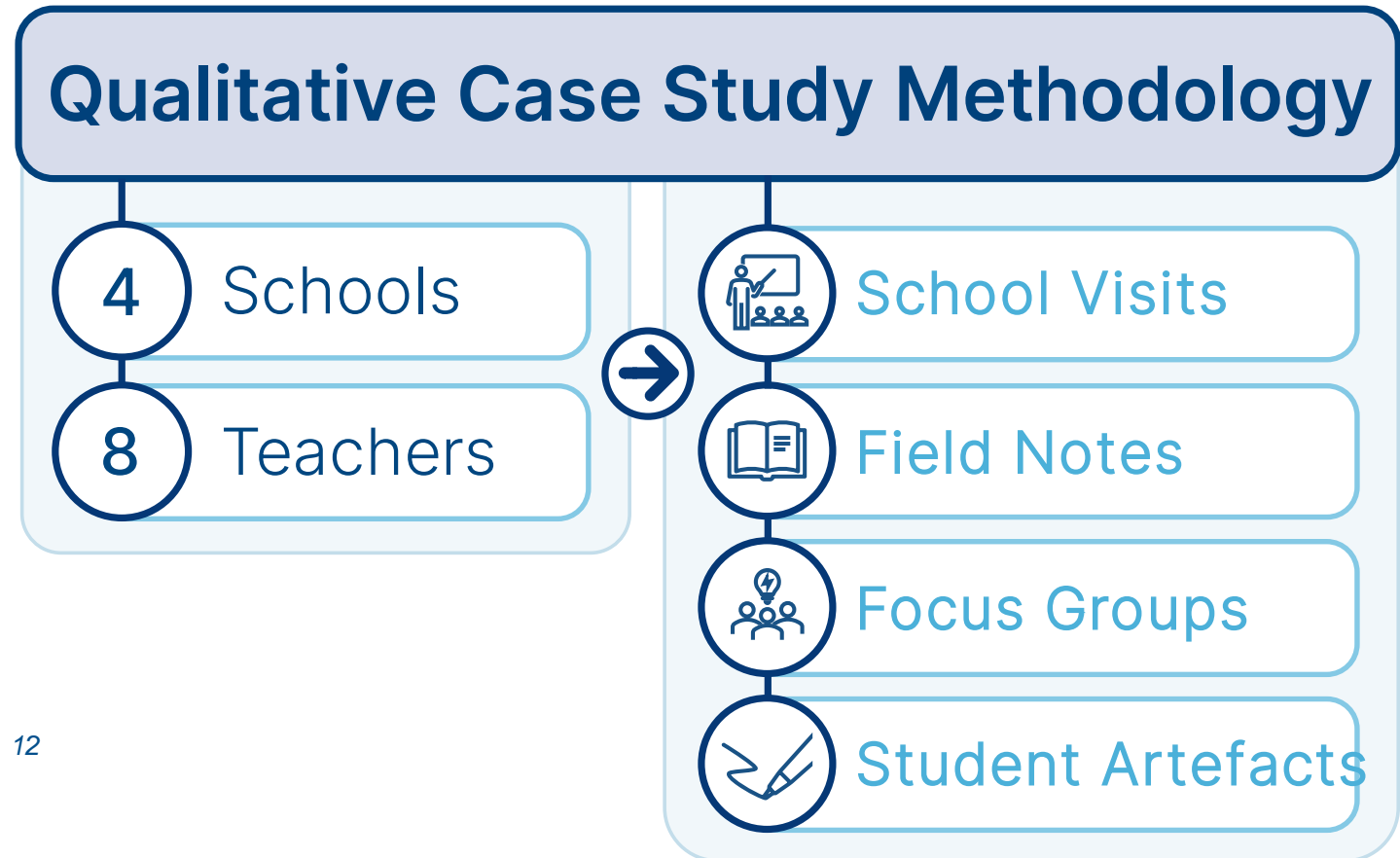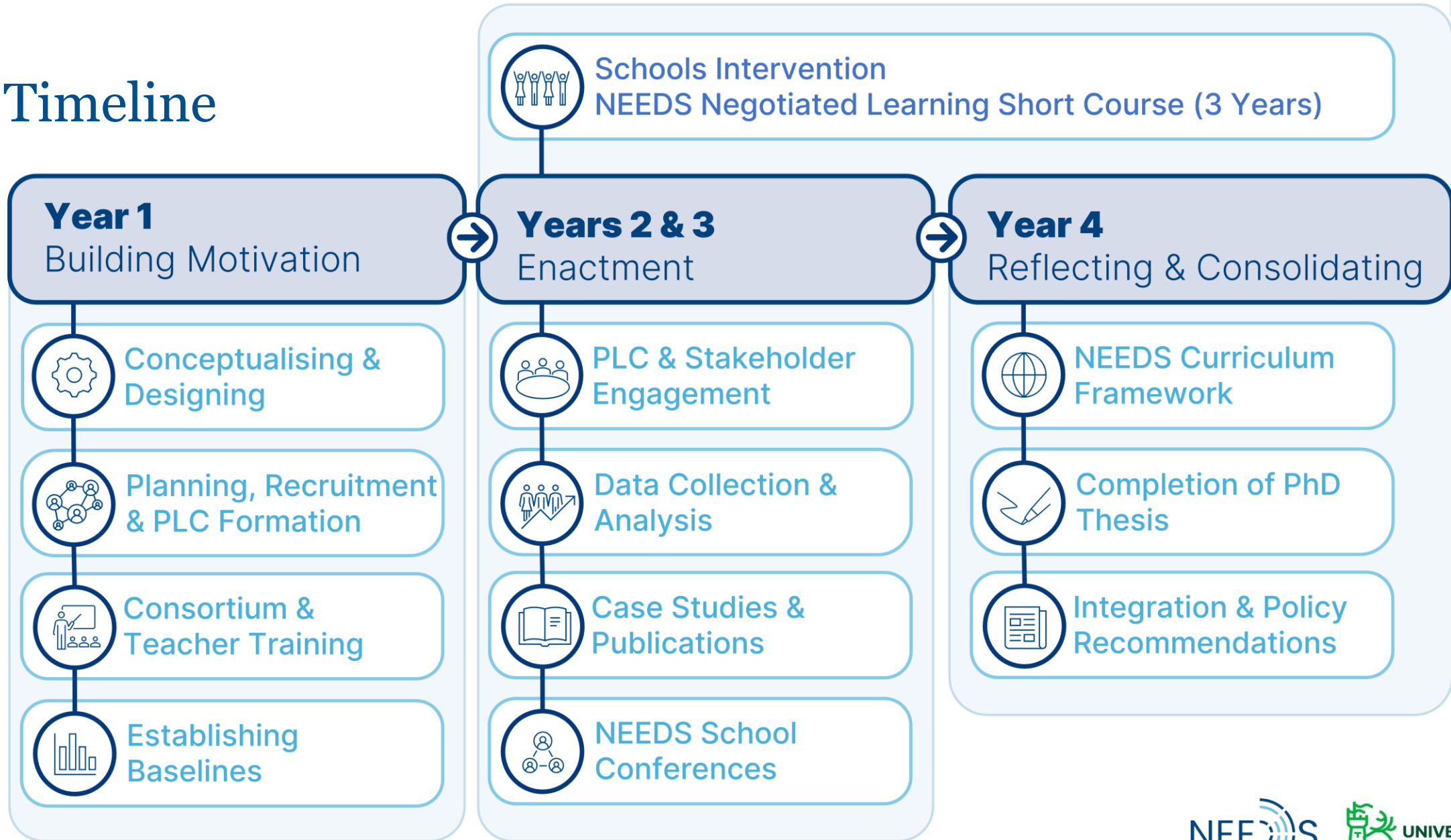# NEEDS Socio-Cultural Approach
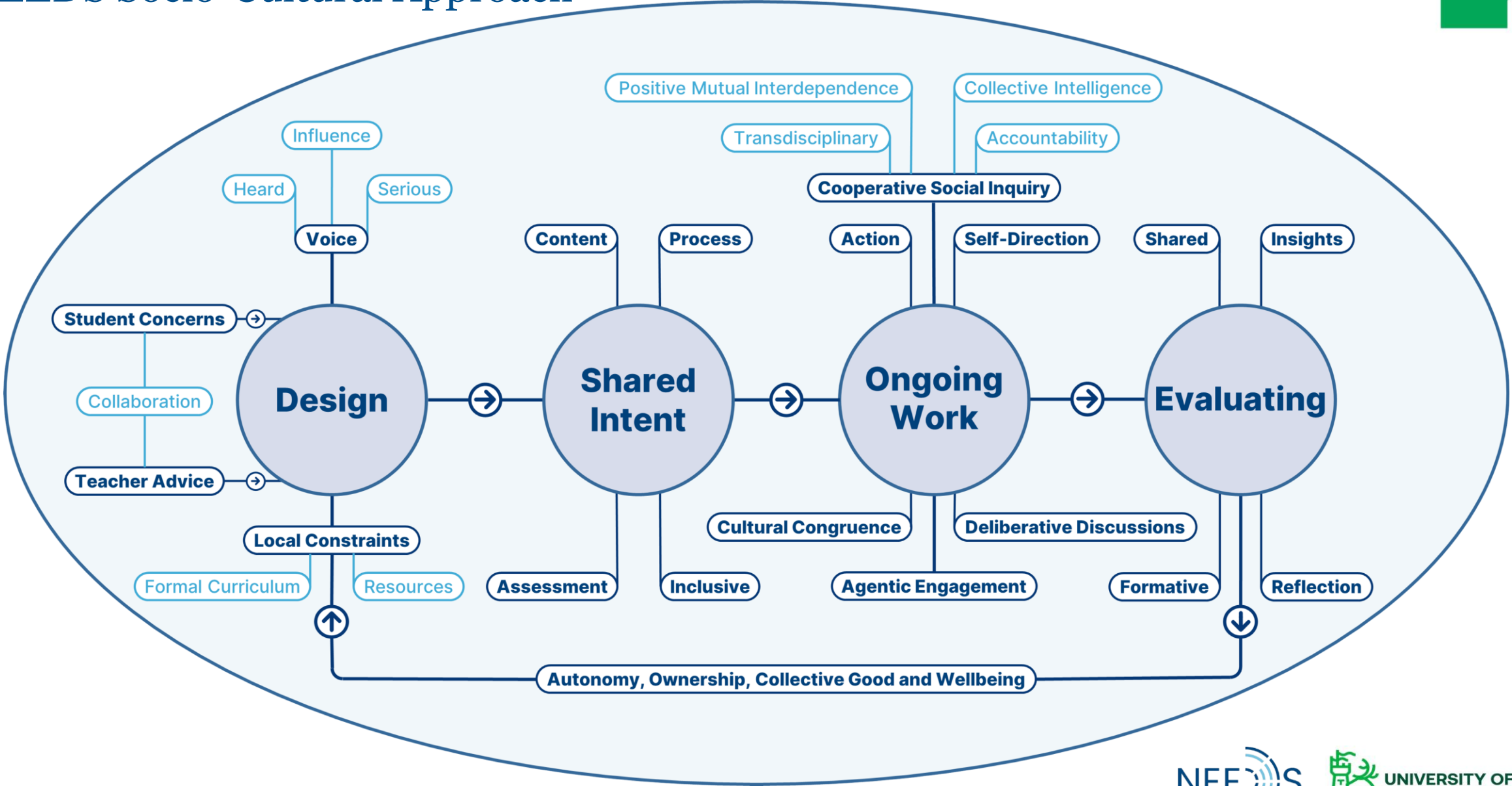
Methods

Methods

- Observational school visits
- Field notes
- Focus Groups
- Teacher Interviews
- Student Artefacts
- Close-To-Practice
  - Practitioner Inquiry
  - Critical Incident Technique[8]
- Toolkits
  - Student Wellbeing[9]
  - Student Self-Direction[10]
  - Student Voice & Participation[11, 12]

Qualitative Case Study Methodology

4 Schools

8 Teachers

→

School Visits

Field Notes

Focus Groups

Student Artefacts

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Timeline

Schools Intervention
NEEDS Negotiated Learning Short Course (3 Years)

Year 1
Building Motivation

Years 2 & 3
Enactment

Year 4
Reflecting & Consolidating

Year 1	Years 2 & 3	Year 4
Conceptualising & Designing	PLC & Stakeholder Engagement	NEEDS Curriculum Framework
Planning, Recruitment & PLC Formation	Data Collection & Analysis	Completion of PhD Thesis
Consortium & Teacher Training	Case Studies & Publications	Integration & Policy Recommendations
Establishing Baselines	NEEDS School Conferences	

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Initial Findings

Data Collection

- School Visits and Observations
  - **17** classroom observations with field notes documented and analysed
  - Visits to each school scheduled every month

- **8** Teacher Semi-Structured Interviews, **4** Teacher Focus Groups
  - Thematic Coding through NVivo
  - Additional teacher focus groups on Agency and Competencies for Democratic Culture to be held

- **12** Student Focus Groups
  - 8 focusing on Agency
  - 4 focusing on the Competencies for Democratic Culture
  - Thematic Coding through NVivo
  - Additional student focus groups to be held

- **Toolkits**
  - Surveys distributed to schools, first round complete with second round April/May

Findings

- When you give students the space to talk…

""What's a student council?" - Student A

"All I know is First Years can't be on the student council so I dunno…" - Student B (in response)

School 1, Agency FG 1

Findings

- Getting comfortable took a while!

- Initially teachers were making most of the decisions

- Students were not used to making these types of decisions – lead to initial **confusion**

- Having **unhurried time** to explore and be flexible allowed students to ease into new ways of working together.

"Well, the teachers should be in charge of like, how much work we should do. You should be in charge of getting that work done." – Student A

"But it could be 50-50 you do it like half the time, and the teacher gets to decide half the time. " – Student B (in response)

- School 1, Agency FG 1

*"When something comes up and you're **actually interested** in it, and you want to…Learn more about it, but the teacher **has to move**. Like, I understand that like but still, you have six years in here so… Like everybody should get to understand it, like properly before the teacher moves on." – Student C*

- School 1, Agency FG 1

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Findings

4 Schools, 9 classes:

- Adolescent Anxiety & The Impact of School
  - Why do we learn *about* Wellbeing but not *for* Wellbeing?
  - Developing **collective responsibility**, **positive mutual interdependence**

- Farmer Health & Safety – Physical and Mental Health and Wellbeing
  - Developing **tolerance**, **shared intent**

*"Like we all have, like, a pretty good relationship with each other. We know people better than we know other people in other classes like, but I feel like we all do have a good relationship with each other and we all like…**listen** to our **decisions** and like be able to express ourselves." - Student A*

School 2, Agency FG 2

- Homelessness: Who's at Fault?
  - Changing what is **expected** of 12y/o students and beliefs about their **role** and **capacity**

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Findings

- Changes in beliefs about the role of students and role of teachers

- Students are **increasingly self-motivating**
  - General sense of surprise amongst Teachers!

- Students are changing their beliefs about the purpose of education

*"It's like you can **express yourself more**. You're learning and you get to learn from the students as well as teachers. So like in most classrooms and classes you you're sort of just getting information from the teachers and not from your like peers and the students, but in negotiated learning you've got to hear from the teachers and the students both." – Student A*

School 3, Agency FG 2

Additional Information & Contact

Supporters of NEEDS
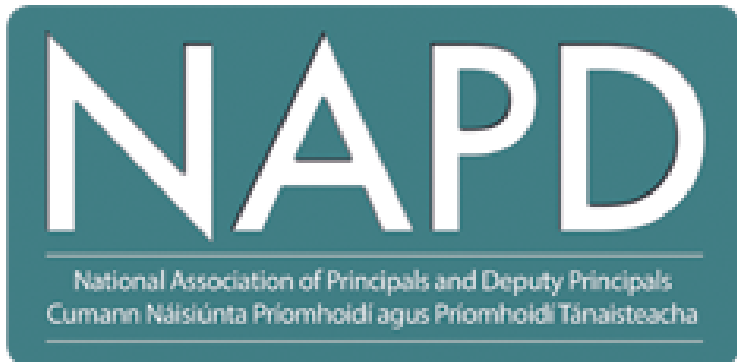
Website & Contact

- NEEDS Website – NeedsIreland.eu

- Éabha Hughes – Eabha.hughes@ul.ie

Questions?

References

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Thank you

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Additional Slides & Supporting Diagrams

- Context for NEEDS
- Reciprocal Causality between Voice, Agency & Engagement
- NIC as modelled by NEEDS Teachers
- Motivated vs Negotiated Curriculum
- NEEDS Student Toolkits

The Context for NEEDS

Post-Primary in Ireland

- Traditionally, Irish education was dominated by focus on terminal examinations to determine university entrance
  - Junior Certificate (3 Years)
  - Leaving Certificate (2 Years)

- Original Junior Certificate program (1992) revised in a national consultative process "Innovation and Identity" (2010) for more **relevant**, **meaningful learning**

- Curriculum changes (2015) placed an emphasis on student voice and agency

- National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making

- Junior Cycle Framework (current)
  - **Short Courses**
  - Few schools engage with this element as intended
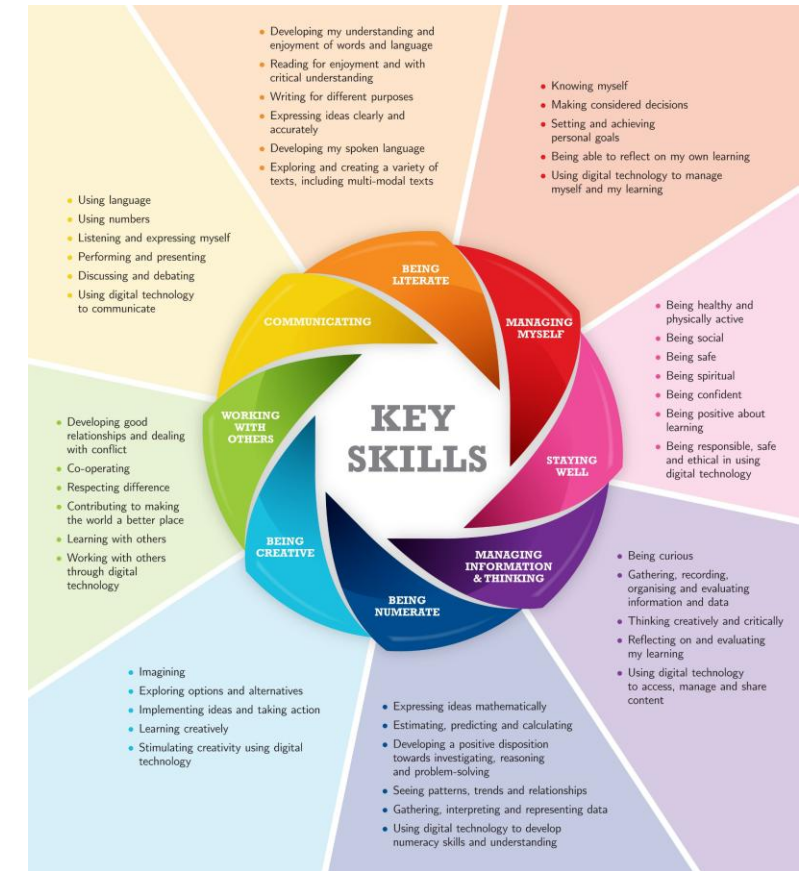
International Context

"We need a **new social contract for education** to repair injustices while transforming the future. This new social contract must be grounded in human rights and based on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity. It must encompass an ethic of care, reciprocity, and solidarity. It must strengthen education as a public endeavour and a common good."

"*Reimagining Our Futures Together – A New Social Contract for Education*."
UNESCO (2021, pg. 3).

REPORT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE FUTURES OF EDUCATION

Reciprocal Causality between Voice, Agency & Engagement

Forms of Engagement	What is learned	How it is learned	Cooperative Inquiry	Sustained Engagement	Reflecting on Learning	Evaluating Learning
Passive					🟧	🟧
Active			🟧	🟧	🟩	🟩
Agentic	🟩	🟩	🟩	🟩	🟩	🟩

Authenticity

Meaning

DEVELOPING

Participation

Inclusion

Teacher Identity

Power Relations

Student Identity
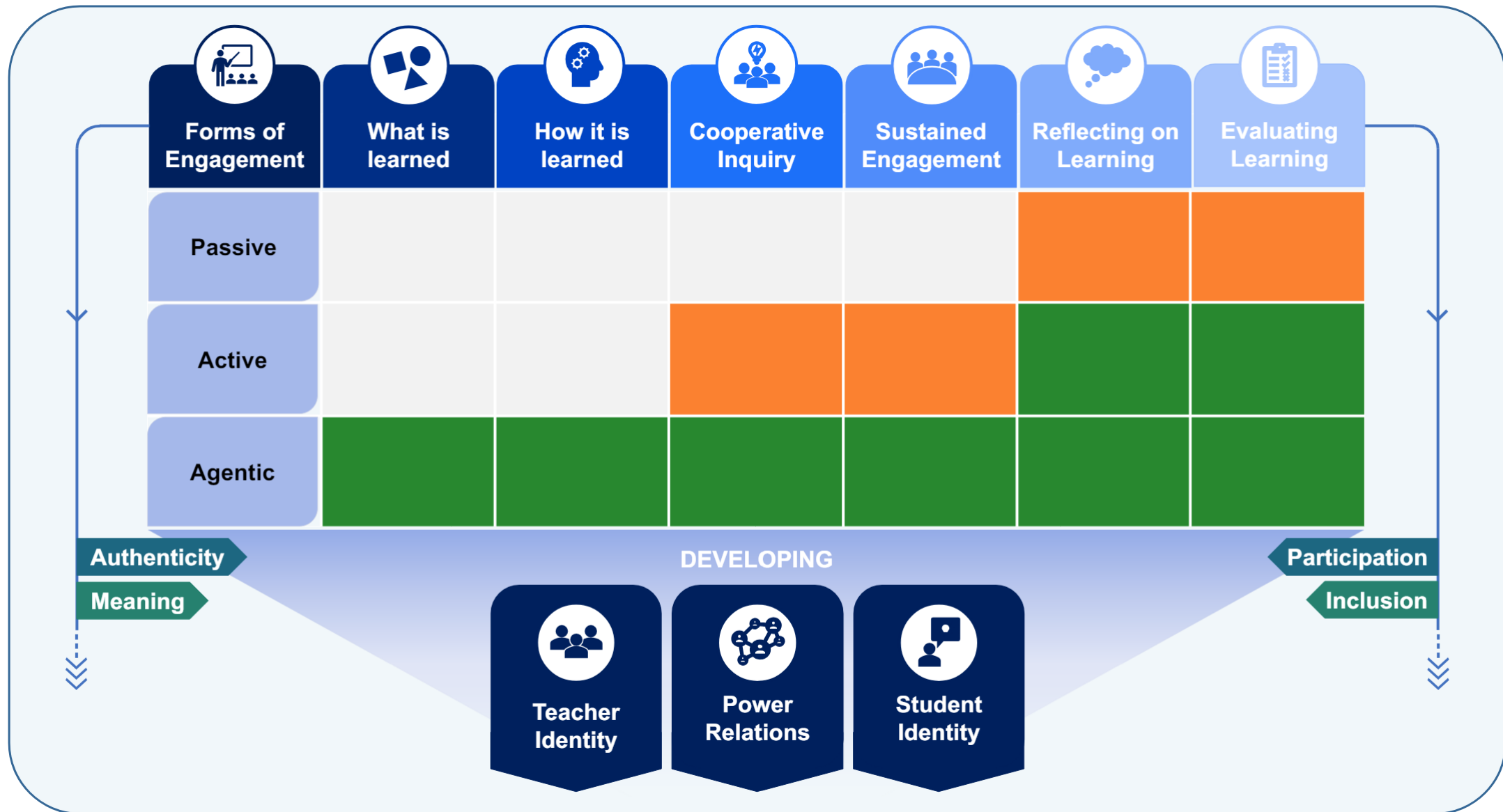
Figure 2: Forms of engagement support for student voice[1].

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Reciprocal Causality between Voice, Agency, Participation & Engagement

1. In understanding the reciprocal causality between these variables, this leads me to the recent paper by O'Reilly and O'Grady where they <u>compare forms of engagement that are critical</u> in addressing the challenges to voice and agency.

2. The **green** cells indicate where forms of engagement have strong affordances in relation to voice; whereas **orange** has some affordances and little to none where it is left blank.

- 'What is learned' - having a say in the material/content explored in the learning process;
- 'How it is learned' - having an **active**, **ongoing** say in the processes and approaches used to learn,
- 'Cooperative inquiry' - presented by **Kauppi and Drerup** involves teachers and students working together, particularly through deliberative discussions and taking intelligent action,
- 'Sustained engagement' - sufficient time is needed to fully explore learning and allow for incidental learning to take place,
- 'Reflecting on Learning' - we have that metacognitive dimension monitoring progress and modifying plans as we progress through work,
- 'Evaluating learning' - allows for collaborative assessment of the quality of work by teachers and students together.

- They emphasise the <u>importance of authenticity and inclusion</u> to enable genuine, respectful, and tolerant environments, where all students feel valued, heard, and empowered to actively participate in shaping their educational experience.

- As we move towards more active and then **agentic** forms of engagement, we see increased participation and a <u>shared meaning</u> of learning developing, which can go on to influence and change teacher and student identities in the classroom and hence the power relations between them.

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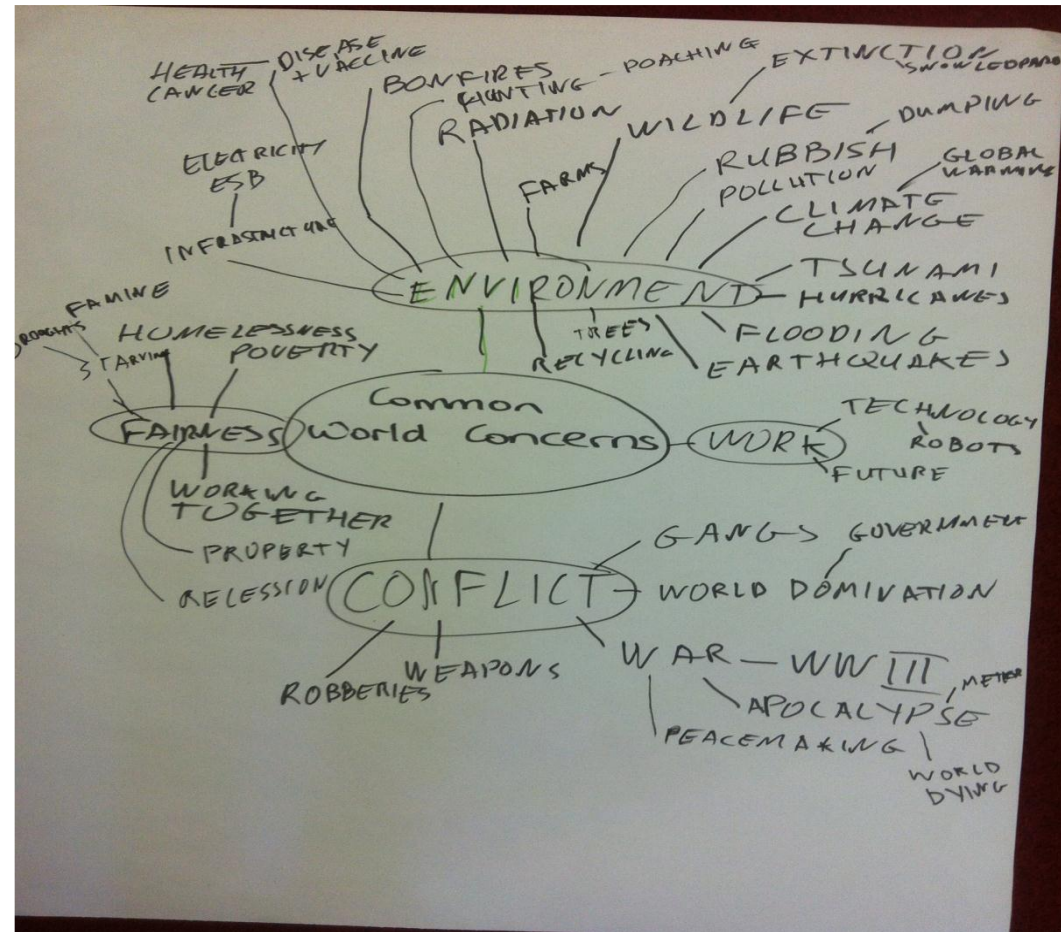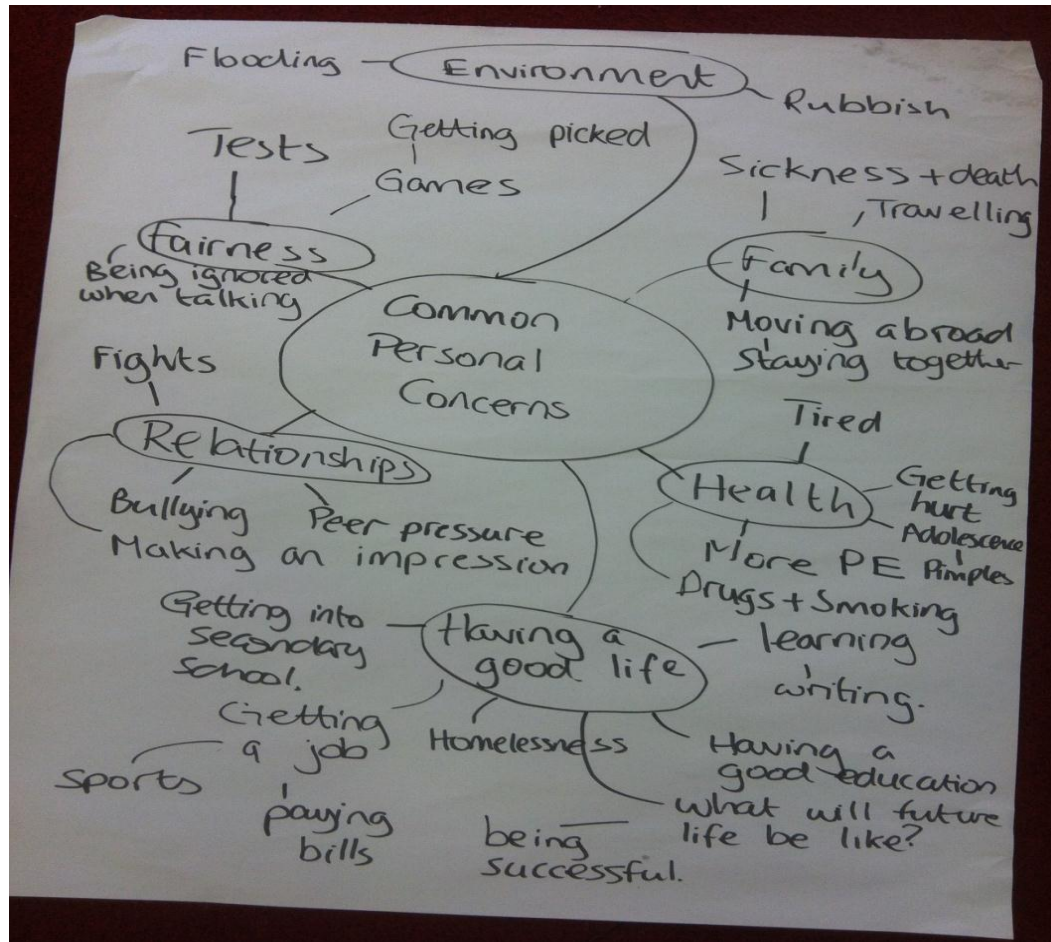
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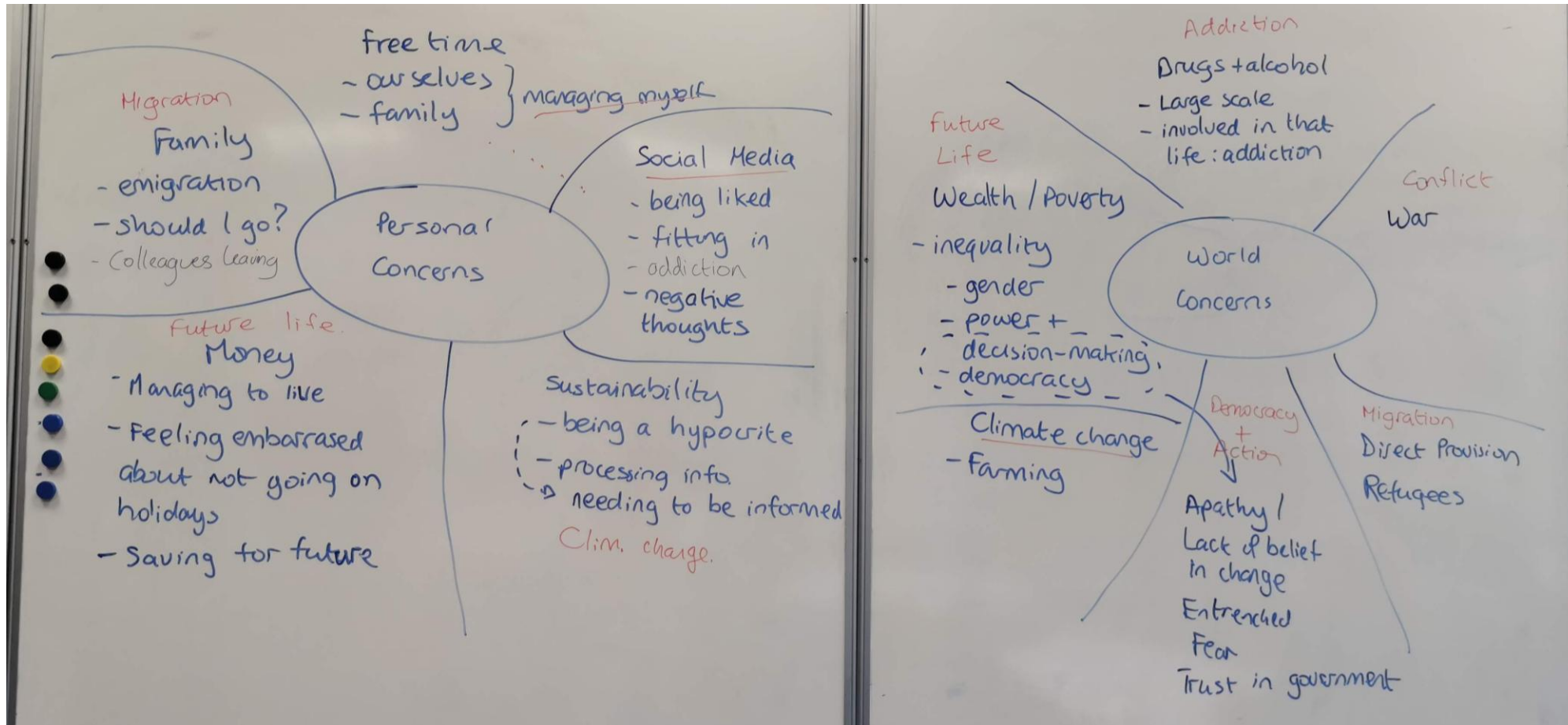OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Negotiated, Integrated Curriculum

- As modelled by NEEDS Teachers in the 2-day Professional Development Workshop 1, May 2024

Steps 1-4: Personal & Global Concerns:

Step 5: Finding Themes

Step 6: Student Vote

7. Democracy + Action
- Trust in Govt.
- Lack of change
- Fear / Apathy / Entrenched

8. Conflict
- War

4. Climate Change
- Sustainability
- Farming
- Change → am I doing enough? (hypocracy)

5. Social Media
- Fitting in / being liked
- addiction
- Negative thoughts

6. Addiction
- drugs + Alcohol
- Life
- Increasing

1. Migration
- direct provision
- Refugees
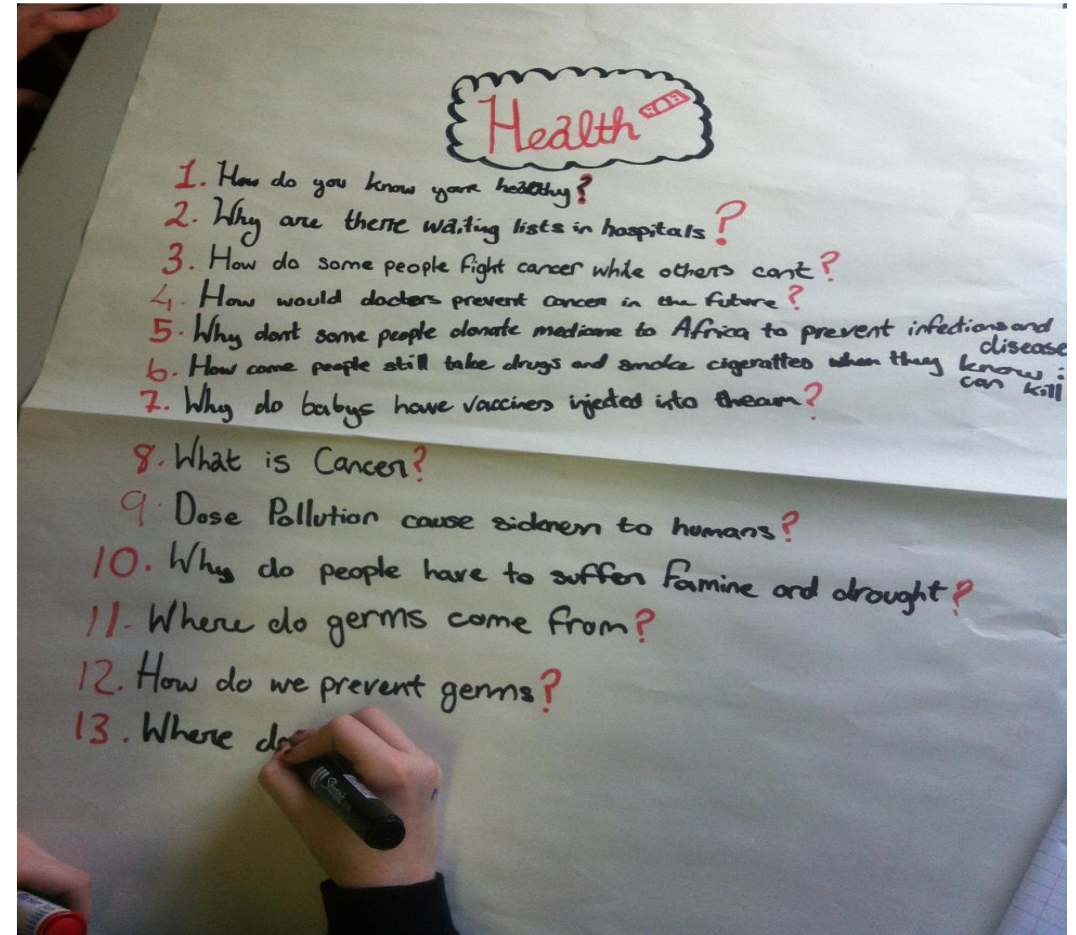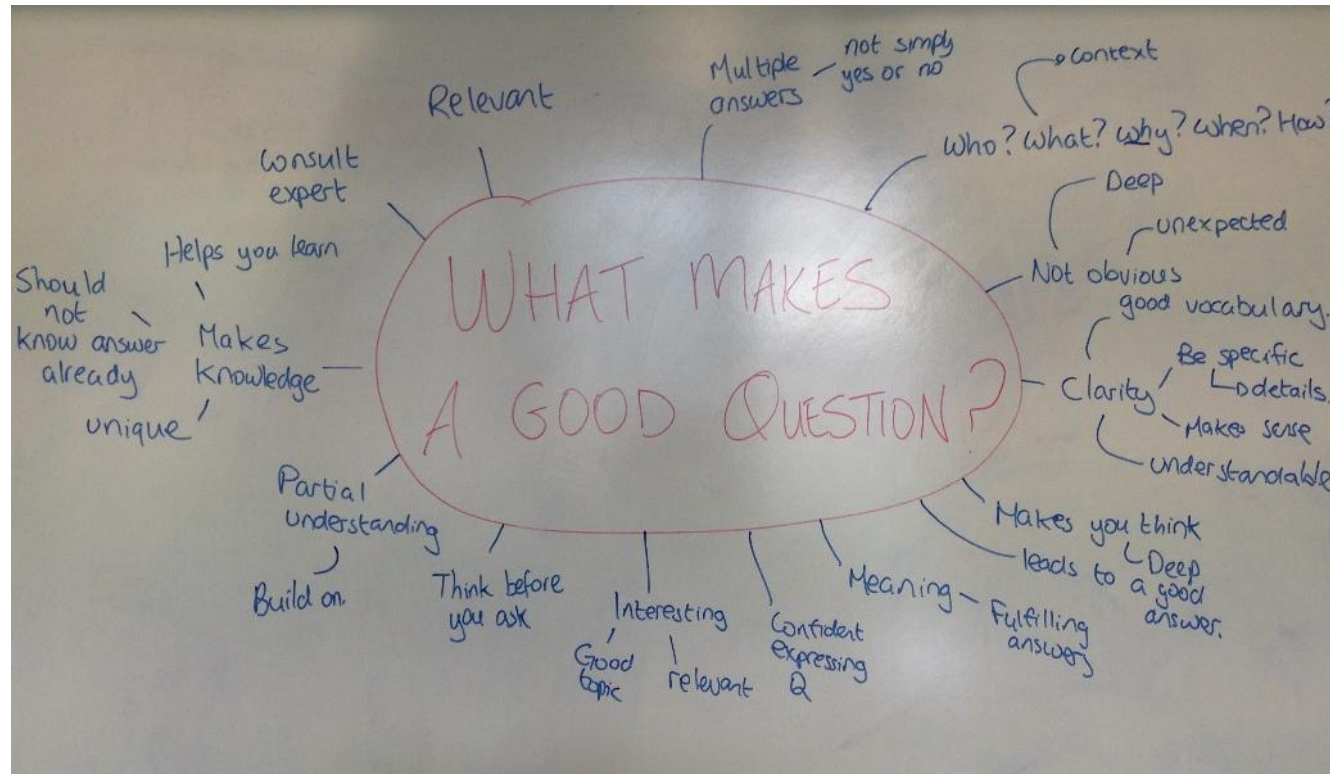- Emigration (family + colleagues)

2. Future Life
- Wealth inequality
- Social inequality
- Power inequality
- Money

3. Managing Myself
- Ourselves
- Free time
- family
- apathy
- fear

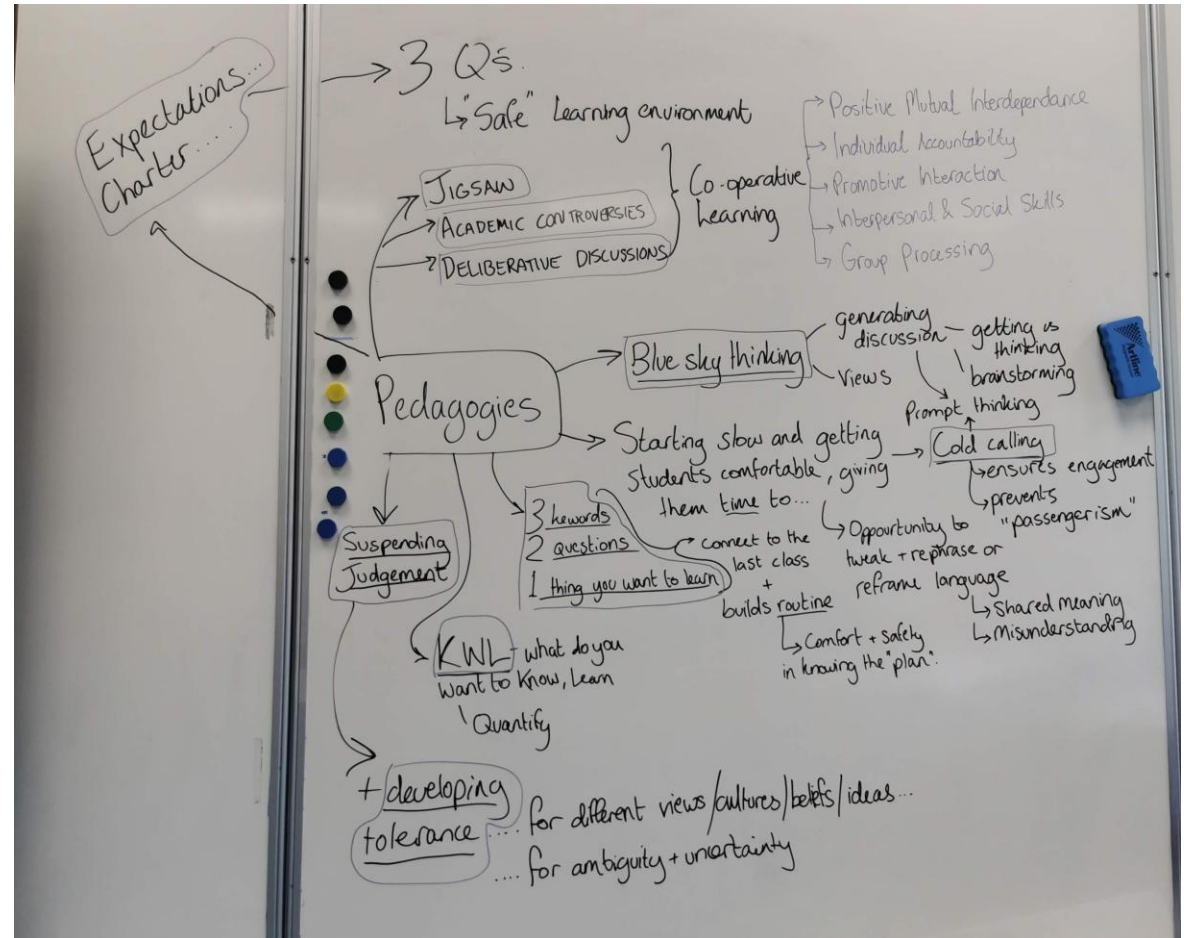# Step 8: Generating Questions

Step 9: Connecting Questions to Activities

Step 10: Unit Planning

Moving from a Motivated Curriculum...
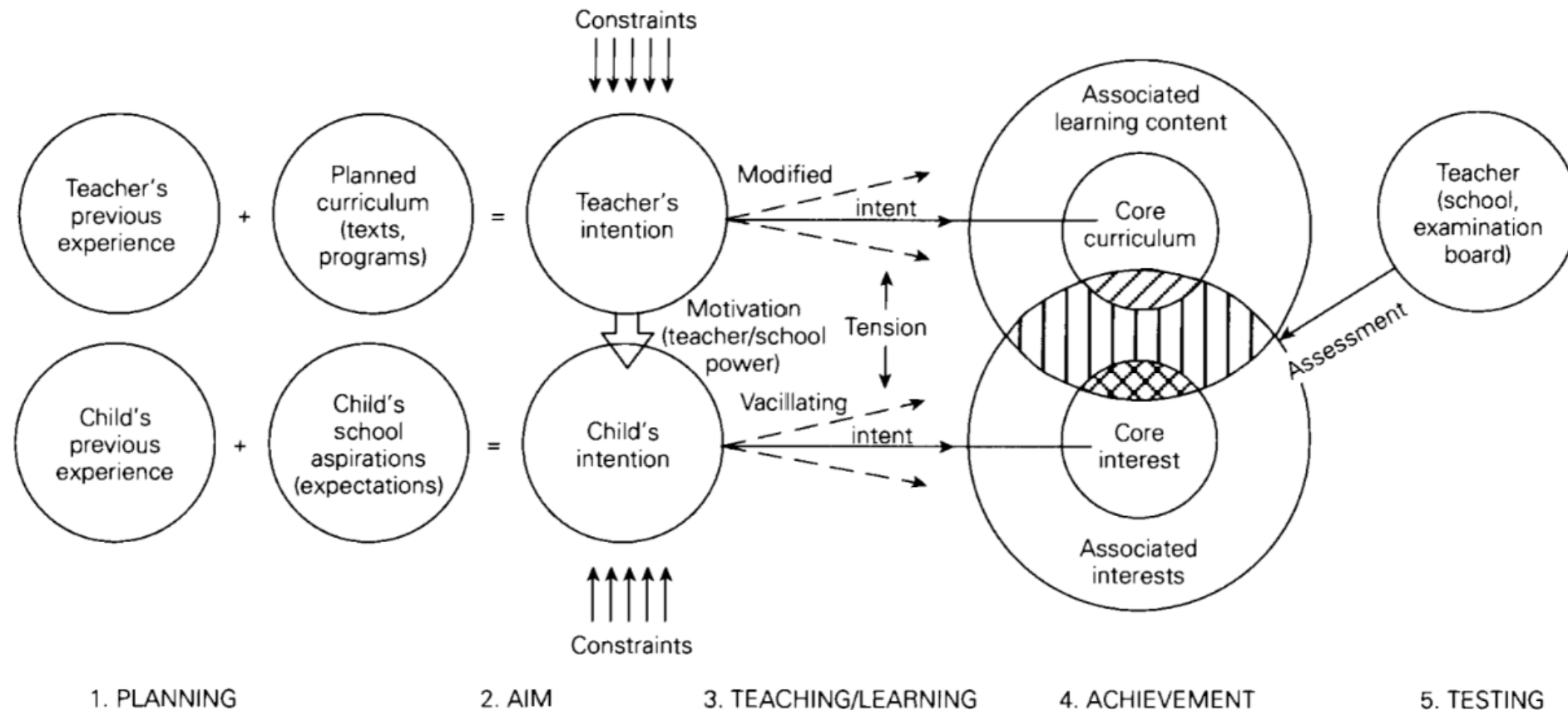

Figure 1: Model A: Motivation

Negotiating the curriculum: Educating for the 21st century (Boomer *et al.*, 2005)

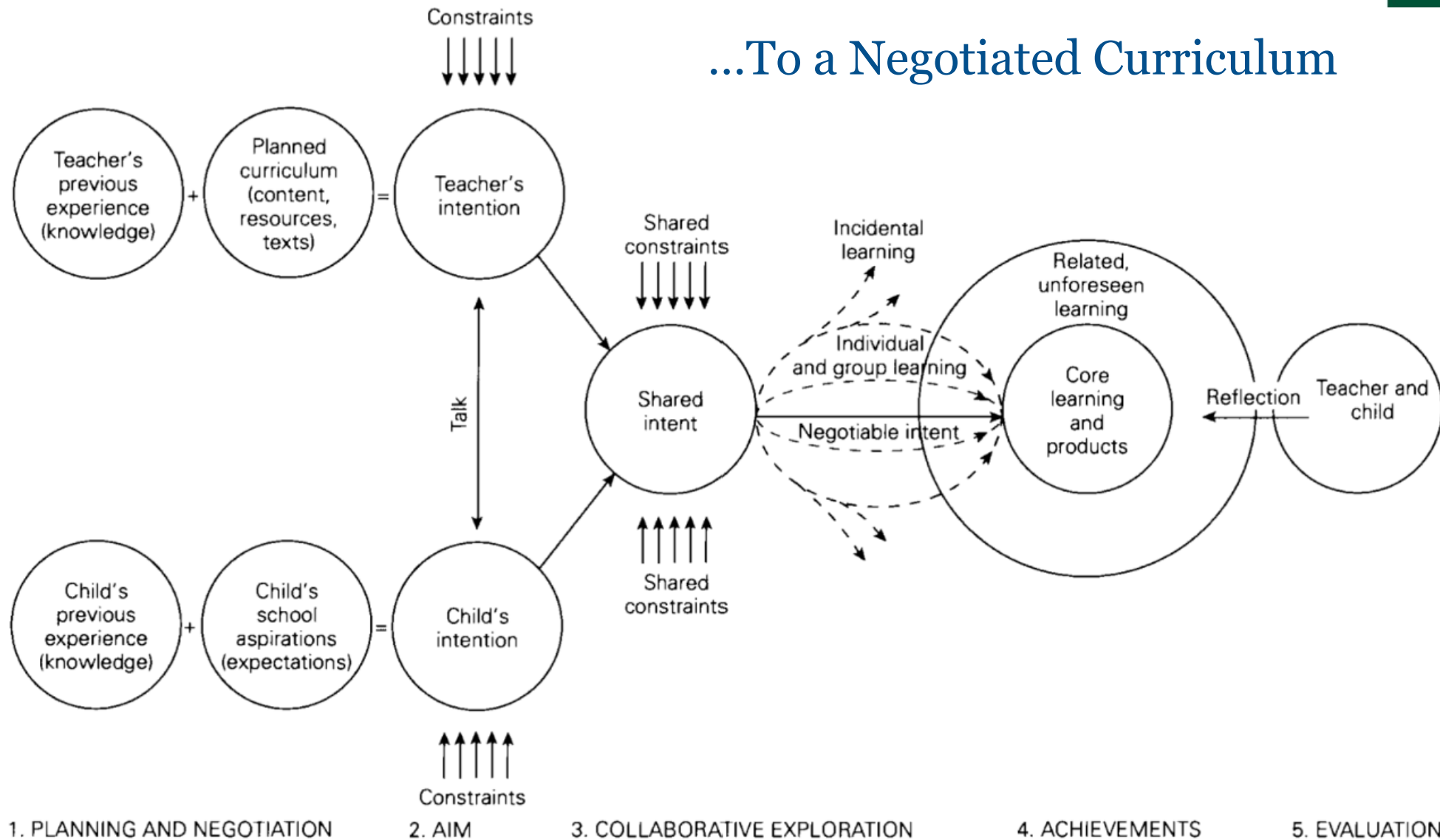# ...To a Negotiated Curriculum

Figure 2: Model B: Negotiation

1. PLANNING AND NEGOTIATION   2. AIM   3. COLLABORATIVE EXPLORATION   4. ACHIEVEMENTS   5. EVALUATION

Negotiating the curriculum: Educating for the 21st century (Boomer *et al.,* 2005)

Key Stakeholder Engagement

- **NCCA**:
  - Paul Behan – Negotiated Learning Short Course recognised on JCPA.

- **WWGS & NAPD**:
  - PD workshop developed in conjunction, delivered with Lizzy Noone (WWGS)

- **ACCS**:
  - Ger Halbert and Áine O'Sullivan, ACCS - NEEDS Critical Friends Advisory Board.

- **Experts in Field**:
  - Professor James 'Jim' Beane, National-Louis University
  - Derry Hannam, Education for Democracy Consultant

- **International Dissemination**:
  - Professor Mark Priestly, Dr Andrea Priestly and Mr Brian Johnston, University of Stirling – Formal invitation to present NEEDS at the Stirling Network for Curriculum Studies, February 2025.
  - Dr. Aidan Clifford, EU-DEC – presented the work of NEEDS in keynote, Transnational DEMOCRAT Workshop, DCU, June 2024.

NEEDS Student Toolkits

Toolkits: Wellbeing

EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Wellbeing[9] ([Link](#))

(Kern *et al.*, 2016)

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This is a survey about you! Please read each of the following statements. Circle how much each statement describes you. Please be honest - there are no right or wrong answers!

Statement					
When something good happens to me, I have people who I like to share the good news with.	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
I finish whatever I begin.	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
I am optimistic about my future	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
I feel happy.	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
When I do an activity, I enjoy it so much that I lose track of time.	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
I have a lot of fun.	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
I get completely absorbed in what I am doing.	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
I love life.	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
I keep at my schoolwork until I am done with it.	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
When I have a problem, I have someone who will be there for me.	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
I get so involved in activities that I forget about everything else.	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
When I am learning something new, I lose track of how much time has passed.	Not at all like me	A little like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me
In uncertain times, I expect the best.	Not at all like me	A little like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me
There are people in my life who really care about me.	Not at all like me	A little like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me
I think good things are going to happen to me.	Not at all like me	A little like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me
I have friends that I really care about.	Not at all like me	A little like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me
Once I make a plan to get something done, I stick to it.	Not at all like me	A little like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me
I believe that things will work out, no matter how difficult they seem.	Not at all like me	A little like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me
I am a hard worker.	Not at all like me	A little like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me
I am a cheerful person.	Not at all like me	A little like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me

Thank you!

Toolkits: Self-Direction

'**Monitoring** and **Adapting**' is all about <u>evaluating</u> progress, <u>adapting</u> learning strategies, using failure to grow from your mistakes, and attributing your success to effort, persistence, access, opportunities, help, and time.
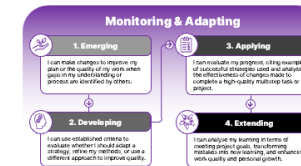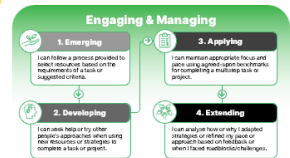
Please be honest – there are no right or wrong answers!

Read each of the following statements **carefully**.

Reflecting on your past experiences to think about how you can use a growth mindset by:
- Checking your work
- Adapting when things are not working

5.1 What have you accomplished in <u>past work</u> that makes you feel you can be confident in how you **monitor** and **adapt** your learning? Write about an example here:

Engaging & Managing

Engaging and **Managing** is all about seeking out relevant resources and information to support your learning goals and refining your learning strategies to maintain effective pace, reach short-term benchmarks and long-term goals.

"What am I learning about finding resources, managing my time and seeking help when I need it?"
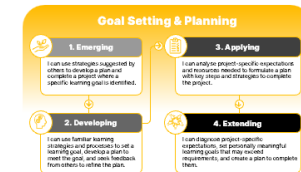
BEST Self-Direction Toolkit[10] (Link)

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Self-Direction Rubric

Self-Awareness

Self-Awareness is your ability to reflect on your past experiences to evaluate your own strengths, limitations, motivations, interests and goals within different learning contexts.

"What am I learning about myself, as a learner?"

Initiative & Ownership

Initiative and **Ownership** means taking responsibility for your learning, finding meaningful questions, shaping learning opportunities to fit your interests and seeking input or feedback from others.

"How can I integrate my personal interests into how I approach new learning?"

Goal Setting & Planning

Goal Setting and **Planning** looks at developing long-term goals, establishing meaningful learning targets, identifying effective learning strategies and planning out steps.

"How can I break down a complex project or task and develop concrete steps to accomplish it?"

Engaging & Managing

Engaging and **Managing** is all about seeking out relevant resources and information to support your learning goals and refining your learning strategies to maintain effective pace, reach short-term benchmarks and long-term goals.

"What am I learning about finding resources, managing my time and seeking help when I need it?"

Monitoring & Adapting

Monitoring and **Adapting** is all about evaluating progress, adapting strategies, learning from failure to grow from mistakes, and attributing success to motivation and effort.

"Am I able to see when something isn't working well, adjust my approach and learn from mistakes?"

Level	Self-Awareness	Initiative & Ownership	Goal Setting & Planning	Engaging & Managing	Monitoring & Adapting
Beginning	I can identify tasks I'd like to work on and can explain how my learning preferences or choices relate to my strengths or interests.	With support, I can try new experiences to find out what new things might interest me.	I can follow a process my teacher showed me to identify steps or strategies that will help me meet a learning goal.	I can use new resources or learning strategies modelled by others to complete a task.	I can keep working on learning tasks with encouragement from others or by following checkpoints to help me focus on what to do.
Emerging	I can identify my strengths and areas needed for growth, using feedback from others.	I can explain how my interests connect to what I learn from others, and I can choose learning opportunities from options provided by others.	I can use strategies from others plan develop a plan and complete a project where a specific learning goal is identified.	I can follow a process to select my own resources or pick the best strategies for a task based on the requirements of a task.	I can make changes to improve my plan or the quality of my work when given feedback by others.
Developing	I can describe how strategies I know already can help with a new learning task and how these strategies can be used or improved on during a new project.	I can explain how others' experiences have expanded my learning and recognize my role in learning by asking relevant questions and seeking support.	I can work with others to set goals and use familiar strategies to create a plan, seek feedback, and improve it.	I can explain how I used a familiar learning strategy and how I used new strategies or resources from other people when completing a task.	I can use established criteria to evaluate whether I should modify my strategy or approach or refine my methods, to improve the quality of my work.
Applying	I can find relevant examples in my past work to explain why I needed a strategy and how I successfully used it.	I can ask relevant questions and work together with others to shape new learning opportunities and create goals that match my interests and strengths.	I can analyse project-specific expectations and resources needed to develop a plan with key steps and strategies to complete the project.	I can maintain my focus and speed to make progress toward completing multistep tasks by reaching checkpoints identified by my teacher or peers.	I can evaluate my progress by highlighting examples of successful strategies and analysing the effectiveness of changes made to complete a high-quality project.
Extending	I can cite/reference examples from my work to evaluate my progress in overcoming barriers and expanding my strengths.	I can take responsibility for my learning and make it more meaningful by finding new areas of interest and rethinking challenges.	I can outline project-specific expectations, set personally meaningful learning goals that may exceed requirements, and create a plan to complete them.	I can analyse how/why I adapted strategies or changed my approach based on feedback or when I faced challenges so I could accomplish learning that was more complex.	I can reflect on my learning and explain how I might change my approach to learn from mistakes, enhance work quality and personal growth, and meet project goals.

BEST Self-Direction Toolkit[10] (Link)

09/04/2025

NEEDS — Negotiating the Essentials for Education in Democratic Societies

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK — OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Toolkits: Participation and Voice

Based on:

1. Student Voice: The Instrument of Change[11] (Link)

2. HUB na nÓg Participation Toolkit[12] (Link)

Question:	Response Options:				
Authenticity/Learning: *In my School...*					
1. Teachers are willing to learn from students in school.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
2. I believe I can make a difference in this world.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
3. School helps me understand what is happening in my life.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
4. School helps me understand what is happening in the world.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
5. The Learning in school really matters to me.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
6. I think Learning at school really matters to other students.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always

Question:	Response Options:				
Inclusion/Belonging: *In my School...*					
7. I have a voice in decision making at school.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
8. Other students have a voice in decision making in school.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
9. I see myself as a leader at school.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
10. Other students see me as a leader at school.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
11. My opinions are taken seriously at school.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
12. I think all opinions are taken seriously at school.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always

Question:	Response Options:				
Space: *In my School......*					
13. I am listened to.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
14. I feel comfortable giving my opinions.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
15. I feel safe giving my opinions.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
16. A lot of different voices are listened to.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always

Question:	Response Options:				
Voice: *In my School......*					
17. I get enough information to help me give my opinion.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
18. I get support to have my voice heard.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
19. I can give my opinions whatever way I want.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always
20. I have enough time to talk when I am asked to give my opinions.	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Almost Always