Research Article

10.20856/jnicec.5606

Reframing student voice and participation in the UK education system for socially just career work

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To cite this article:

Freeman, N. (2026). Reframing student voice and participation in the UK education system for socially just career work. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, *56*(1), 66-84. https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5606

Abstract

This integrative review explores the extent to which student voice and participatory practices in UK education reflect genuine power-sharing, and their potential application to socially just career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG). Twelve sources were synthesised using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis method, generating four key themes: structural constraints, psychological safety, agency and representation, and the potential for citizen power. Findings highlight tensions between participatory rhetoric and practice, and propose an original conceptual model combining Arnstein's Ladder, ethical pragmatism, and participatory action research. The review concludes that future inclusive CEIAG practice must embed student co-design to avoid reinforcing inequality.

Keywords: Student voice, career education, student participation, social justice, United Kingdom

Introduction

Despite increasing policy attention to the notion of 'student voice', student participation in shaping educational practice, particularly within career education, information, advice, and guidance (CEIAG), often remains limited, tokenistic, or poorly defined (Resch, 2023; Roberts, 2015). Across both secondary and higher education settings in the UK, participatory processes are frequently constrained by neoliberal imperatives, such as marketisation, accountability pressures, and curriculum standardisation, which inhibit meaningful

engagement (Hooley et al., 2021). While institutional rhetoric around voice has grown, there remains a disconnect between policy commitments and students' influence over educational structures, especially those concerning their future trajectories (Higdon, 2016).

Key concepts such as student voice, student choice, and participation are often conflated in both literature and practice. 'Voice' typically refers to the expression of student perspectives, whereas 'choice' centres on options provided within pre-structured frameworks (Finneran et al., 2021; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Stein et al., 2021). Participation, by contrast, implies collaboration and power-sharing in educational content and delivery. While 'student voice' and 'student participation' are distinct concepts, they are also interconnected. Voice represents the expression of students' perspectives and experiences, whereas participation extends this expression into shared decision-making and co-construction of practice. In this review, the distinction is used analytically rather than absolutely: not all expressions of voice equate to power-sharing, yet all meaningful participation depends on voice as its foundation (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). This review draws upon Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation to differentiate between symbolic involvement and authentic power-sharing, providing a critical lens through which student engagement practices can be assessed.

Within the field of CEIAG, the role of student voice is particularly significant. Career guidance is not a neutral activity; it is deeply shaped by social, cultural, and institutional norms (Hooley, 2019). Without meaningful inclusion of young people's perspectives, career education risks reinforcing inequalities rather than challenging them. The review aligns with Hooley et al.'s (2021) 'five signposts to a socially just approach to career guidance', which advocate for participatory and empowering practices that challenge normative assumptions and expand the capabilities of all learners.

Although a growing body of research explores student voice in general educational contexts, there is a lack of synthesis focused on how these practices are applied within CEIAG. Few studies explore how participatory methods in curriculum design and feedback processes intersect with students' career readiness, aspirations, or transitions. Without synthesis, CEIAG risks excluding the very voices it aims to support, especially those from marginalised or underrepresented groups (Higdon, 2016).

This integrative literature review aims to explore how student voice, choice and participatory processes are conceptualised and enacted in UK secondary and higher education, with a particular focus on their application to CEIAG. It seeks to critically examine the extent to which these practices reflect genuine power-sharing or remain within the realms of tokenism. The review is guided by the following question: To what extent do student voice and participatory practices in UK education reflect genuine power-sharing, and how might they inform socially just approaches to career education and guidance?

Methodology

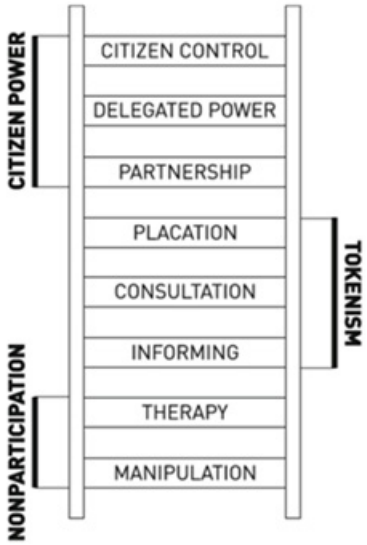
This review adopted an integrative literature review methodology (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) to explore the role of student voice, choice, and participatory curriculum design in English secondary schools and universities. The aim of the review was to explore how such processes adopted in general education settings can be implemented in career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) to promote socially just

practices. An integrative review was chosen due to the dearth of empirical research into student voice specifically within CEIAG (Moote & Archer, 2018). While student voice is increasingly prominent in education discourse (Robinson & Taylor, 2007), its application in career education often remains embedded within broader attainment-focused frameworks. The review was grounded in a social justice paradigm, reflecting a commitment to exploring power relations and structural inequalities in CEIAG. This lens prioritises marginalised voices, challenges deficit framings of disengagement, and supports approaches where students are not merely consulted but seen as co-constructors of their learning and career trajectories (Hooley et al., 2021).

Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

This review is underpinned by Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of participation' (Figure 1); a typology that enables critical engagement with power dynamics in student participation. The ladder was originally developed within urban planning to conceptualise the distribution of power between citizens and authorities (Arnstein, 1969). It presents eight rungs, moving from non-participation (manipulation, therapy), through forms of tokenism (informing, consultation, placation), to degrees of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). The model's enduring value lies in its explicit focus on power redistribution, making it a useful tool for analysing whether participatory processes are symbolic or genuinely empowering. Despite its enduring influence, however, Arnstein's (1969) Ladder has been criticised for its linear and binary structure (Collins & Ison, 2009; Tritter & McCallum, 2006), its limited attention to the relational and emotional dynamics of participation (Beresford, 2012), and its insufficient sensitivity to intersectional power relations (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2008). Although later models, such as Hart's (1992) Ladder of Children's Participation and Lundy's (2007) framework, address issues of voice and children's rights more directly, they pay less attention to structural inequalities and the transfer of power. Despite criticisms that Arnstein's Ladder is linear, binary, and insufficiently sensitive to relational and intersectional dynamics, it was chosen here precisely because of its central concern with power and control. These dimensions are particularly pertinent to CEIAG, where the stakes for students' futures are high, and where institutional practices risk reinforcing rather than disrupting inequality. These are essential in understanding whether student participation processes achieve genuine citizen control or remain tokenistic.

Figure 1. Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969)



Literature identification and search strategy

To structure the search process, the SPIDER tool (Cooke et al., 2012) was employed to reflect the qualitative and experiential nature of the research focus. Search terms were developed using SPIDER components (sample, phenomenon of interest, design, evaluation and research type) and adapted for use in key academic databases (British Education Index, ERIC, and Web of Science). Search strings were refined and piloted before final use. Grey literature was also included to capture practice-based knowledge and current policy mandates, including reports from The Careers and Enterprise Company (2024) and the Department for Education (DfE) (2017).

An example search strategy used in the 'Web of Science' database included: ((student* OR pupil* OR learner*) NEAR/2 (voice* OR input OR feedback OR perspective)) AND (curriculum OR programme* OR education) AND (career* OR guidance) AND (England OR UK). Boolean operators and proximity commands were adjusted per platform. Supplementary hand-searching of key journals and citation chaining was used to capture additional works relevant to the field.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Included texts were published between 2015 and 2025 in line with the introduction of the *National Careers Strategy* in state secondary schools in England (DfE, 2017) which marked a renewed national emphasis on careers education and student engagement within English secondary schools. This time frame ensured that the literature reflects contemporary practices, expectations, and systemic influences relevant to the review's focus. Literature was included if it was written in English, and if it explored student voice, participation, curriculum co-design, or career education in secondary schools, colleges, sixth forms or universities in the UK. Studies were excluded if they focused on SEND-specific contexts only, were outside the UK, or did not centre student participation. Grey literature was included if produced by nationally recognised bodies and aligned with the review topic. While the inclusion criteria prioritised UK-based literature to ensure contextual relevance, one high-quality study from Australia (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023) was retained due to its strong conceptual alignment with the aims of the review. This review draws primarily on UK-based literature to ensure contextual coherence. Careers education and guidance are deeply situated practices shaped by national policy frameworks, accountability regimes, and labour-market ideologies (Hooley, 2019; Sultana, 2021). In the UK, initiatives such as the Gatsby Benchmarks and the Department for Education (DfE) Careers Strategy have constructed distinctive expectations of student agency and institutional responsibility that differ markedly from those in other jurisdictions. Consequently, focusing on UK sources allows for a critical exploration of participation as it is discursively and structurally enacted within this policy environment.

Appraisal and quality assessment

The CASP Qualitative Checklist (CASP, 2018) was used to assess the quality of empirical texts. This enabled a consistent evaluation of trustworthiness, ethical rigour, and methodological transparency across diverse sources. Each source was rated against ten CASP criteria, including clarity of research aims, methodology, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. This quality assessment process ensured that only credible

and relevant studies were included in the synthesis. Grey literature was appraised using relevance, authorship transparency, and publication origin.

Data extraction and management

PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) is a guideline developed to improve the transparency and completeness of reporting in literature syntheses (Page et al., 2021). A PRISMA-style flow diagram (PRISMA, 2020) was created to document the search and selection process, and a data extraction table was developed to capture key details of each study: author, year, context, methodology, findings, and links to Arnstein's ladder (Figure 1). Key details were extracted from each study including focus, methodology and insights, culminating in a data extraction summary table. These details were mapped against Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969) to explore patterns around tokenism and citizen control. Literature was grouped thematically using inductive coding, and an initial coding summary was recorded manually and later organised digitally to facilitate theme development.

Data analysis and thematic synthesis

Thematic synthesis was used to analyse and integrate insights from the selected literature, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach. Four overarching themes were developed through iterative coding and critical reflection, each illuminating the complex interplay between student voice, power, inclusion, and the potential for socially just CEIAG. These themes are presented below, with attention given to theoretical connections, tensions, and implications for participatory practice.

Structural and ideological constraints

A common thread running through literature is the limitations to authentic student participation posed by neoliberal frameworks (Hooley et al., 2021; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023; Young & Jerome, 2020). Even with the best of intentions, political systems at management, institutional and national level can hinder the oft desired journey from tokenistic processes to authentic citizen power. Despite national policy encouraging student voice (DfE, 2014), findings suggest that many approaches remain tokenistic in practice, shaped by marketised, outcome-driven cultures.

Higdon (2016) argues that employability discourses in higher education are shaped by neoliberal ideologies that position students as passive participants. The exclusion of student and graduate voices is, as Higdon (2016) suggests, potentially deliberate. The dominance of employer- and business-led discourse in employability, coupled with a dearth of qualitative research into student and graduate perspectives, serves to prioritise employer needs over student experience and thereby narrows the space available for authentic student voice. Authentic student voice processes might go against the dominant neoliberal, meritocratic backdrop, and therefore are purposely designed to restrict voice within set parameters. This assertion is supported by Young and Jerome (2020) whose exploration of student representation in feedback systems highlights that management ownership of such processes serves to perpetuate unequal power hierarchies. Student representatives participating in the study expressed feelings of frustration and powerlessness in a process sold as inclusive and diplomatic, often becoming less motivated to exercise agency with future initiatives.

Nieminen et al. (2022) contribute further by exploring frameworks of student agency in participatory processes, and highlight problematic institutional responses to student disengagement. They acknowledge that student agency in feedback systems is vital but complex, and that practices aiming to promote agency often unknowingly hinder it through rigidity of feedback systems or misattribution of blame. The researchers highlight that when feedback is framed as a one-directional process of information transmission, students are often blamed for 'not engaging' even when the system itself limits their opportunities to act (pp. 8-9). Feedback methods such as online platforms and rubrics can, as they note, both enable and restrict agency. For example, when students can only access audio feedback passively, without means to annotate or respond, their capacity for dialogue and action is curtailed (p. 9).

Moote and Archer (2018) provide context for such phenomena, exploring student perceptions of CEIAG in English secondary schools and describing how it is heavily stratified along lines of social class and institutional expectations. Their findings illustrate that structurally disadvantaged students are more likely to report feeling that their aspirations are disregarded. This aligns with Young and Jerome's (2020) discussion around tokenism leading to disengagement, and Nieminen et al.'s (2022) conclusion that branding such disengagement as dysfunctional or irresponsible disregards deeper seated societal inequities.

Coney (2023) offers a counter position to the above with her work on autistic students as partners in employability design, explicitly stating that the project was 'underpinned by an emancipatory paradigm (Habermas, 1968/1972)' with a concern for 'emancipating the disempowered, redressing inequality and promoting individual freedoms' (p.2). Unlike tokenistic or consultative 'voice' models, autistic students were involved in all stages of the research (survey analysis, programme co-design, and evaluation). The researcher minimised power differentials by positioning herself as a facilitator and explicitly recognising autistic participants as the experts (p. 4).

Together, these findings reveal a pattern in which student voice is often accommodated only within narrow institutional parameters. Although institutions may claim to promote participation, these efforts are often located within the lower rungs of Arnstein's ladder (1969), such as consultation or placation, without granting students genuine influence.

These structural and ideological limitations pose specific challenges in the context of CEIAG, where the stakes for students' futures are high. If participation remains symbolic, students – especially those from marginalised backgrounds – may feel disillusioned or misrepresented.

The emotional cost of insecure participation

This theme explores how the psychological and emotional dimensions of student participation shape the authenticity and effectiveness of student voice initiatives. Even when formal structures exist to support participation, students and other stakeholders may experience fear of repercussion and emotional fatigue when their contributions are ignored or met with resistance (Finneran et al., 2021; Young & Jerome, 2020). As discussed previously, such experiences can undermine trust in participatory processes and discourage further engagement, particularly among underrepresented students (Messiou et

al., 2025; Moote & Archer, 2018). As highlighted across the literature, psychological safety is a prerequisite for genuine participation (Finneran et al., 2021; Young & Jerome, 2020), yet it is often assumed rather than actively fostered by institutions (Cook & Warwick, 2023; Nieminen et al., 2022). Government reports utilise student voice as a vehicle for market research, with The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) (2024) identifying students' desire for more personalised CEIAG. The review, however, reveals that marginalised students remain underrepresented in shaping such provision.

The notion of student voice functioning as a form of mutual discipline is explored by Young and Jerome (2020). In hierarchical institutional contexts where scrutiny and accountability are heightened, they argue that student feedback is sometimes deployed as a mechanism to discipline staff, while assessments are used to discipline students. The semantics of 'discipline' are significant, as the term implies an expectation to conform to specific standards, with consequences for failing to do so (Collins Dictionary, 2025). It is suggested that power differences between management and lecturers, and even between student representatives and the peers they aim to represent, magnify distrust in what is deemed to be an inclusive practice. They provide empirical evidence that distrust within student–staff feedback relationships is amplified by existing power hierarchies. Several participants reported withholding feedback for fear of negative repercussions, with one describing evaluations as 'blackmail' (p. 11). These findings, interpreted through a Foucauldian framework, illustrate how feedback systems operate as disciplinary mechanisms that reinforce hierarchies rather than foster trust or collaboration.

The challenges of fostering emotional safety in participatory contexts are recognised in Cook and Warwick's (2023) study, which explores how dialogic engagement through a microblogging tool can democratise communication. Their findings suggest that emotional safety can be actively supported through design: asynchronous, low-risk modes of participation allowed quieter students to contribute, while visible staff responses created reciprocal dialogue and validation. Although some voices remained more prominent than others, Cook and Warwick interpret this imbalance as a prompt for reflexive adjustment rather than an unavoidable limitation. This reinforces the argument that exclusion is not an unavoidable pitfall of participation but contingent on facilitation and institutional commitment. Within this frame, the aspiration toward full citizen power remains essential, not as an unreachable ideal, but as a guiding principle for designing participatory systems that continually challenge structural and relational barriers. Nieminen et al. (2022) further problematise institutional responses to student disengagement, arguing that behaviours such as non-participation are too often framed as individual deficits (dysfunctional, maladaptive), rather than symptoms of deeper systemic failures to create psychologically safe environments. By framing student agency as problematic, institutions risk pathologising disengagement rather than understanding it as a rational response to inequitable systems (Hooley et al., 2021; Moote & Archer, 2018). Although their paper is a theoretical synthesis rather than an empirical systematic review, their argument draws on prior studies of feedback systems that reveal how institutional and technological constraints restrict students' capacity to act (see Boud & Molloy, 2013; Henderson et al., 2019). They therefore contend that disengagement should be interpreted as a symptom of insufficiently safe or responsive feedback environments rather than a deficit in student motivation (pp. 8–9). These interpretations mirror Arnstein's (1969) caution that participation without power may amount to manipulation or placation, ultimately eroding trust and reinforcing hierarchical norms. Across the literature, it is evident that psychological safety is not

simply an emotional consideration but a structural requirement for equitable student voice. (Finneran et al., 2021; Moote & Archer, 2018).

Most literature identifies psychological safety as an important precondition for student participation but offers little empirical guidance on how to achieve it (e.g. Nieminen et al., 2022; Young & Jerome, 2020).

Voice, choice, and implications for agency

Even when institutional and psychological factors are considered, questions remain about who is invited to participate in student voice processes, and how this shapes authenticity and inclusivity. While institutions offer mechanisms for representation such as student councils and surveys, in reality participation is frequently restricted to those already empowered to speak: students with higher levels of capital, high achievers, or individuals deemed 'appropriate' by staff. Across the literature, questions emerge about equity of representation, with several studies highlighting how the voices heard are not always reflective of the wider student body (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Stein et al., 2021). In such cases, student voice risks reinforcing privilege and exclusion rather than challenging it, thus remaining within the lower rungs of Arnstein's (1969) ladder, where consultation and placation stand in for genuine redistribution of power.

Stein et al. (2021) suggest that common 'myths' surrounding student voice practices may contribute to disenfranchisement (Stein et al., 2021, p.2), however, the broader literature suggests that such concerns are well-founded. A student quoted in Matthews and Dollinger (2022) remarked: *'Many of us want to make a change, but not all of us can'*. This insightful contribution raises a critical question: Who gets to speak, and who is heard?

Finneran et al. (2021) challenge the assumption that all students are equally positioned to speak, noting that student voice processes risk favouriting students who 'speak the palatable language of the school' (p.3), while further disempowering students who are already marginalised. This claim is reinforced by Matthews and Dollinger (2022) in their exploration of student representation and student partnership. They highlight that, despite efforts towards an ecosystem of authentic student participation, the use of student representatives creates an additional level of hierarchy that hinders the path to true partnership.

Across several studies (Finneran et al., 2023; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023; Scarparolo & MacKinnon, 2023), research participants were either part of formal representative structures or selected from privileged school contexts. In Scarparolo and MacKinnon (2023), participants were sampled from an independent boys' school and were teacher-nominated, suggesting social privilege and a lack of anonymity in their responses. While these students were able to articulate their views with confidence, the samples excluded those from underrepresented groups, raising questions about whose voices are legitimised. In contrast, Coney (2024) prioritises inclusion in her participatory design, ensuring that autistic students work in authentic partnership.

These patterns raise questions about both representation and the purpose of participation in CEIAG. Hooley et al.'s (2021) five signposts to socially just career guidance highlight the need to challenge what is normal and to work at different levels, both of which

require authentic, diverse student input. Yet, when participation is dominated by the most confident and institutionally fluent students, CEIAG risks failing to recognise the systemic barriers.

When student voice mechanisms privilege the already confident or institutionally aligned, participation is not only inequitable, but potentially misleading. Mapping such practices onto Arnstein's (1969) ladder makes clear that inclusion is not simply a question of numbers but of power. When participation draws primarily on already-advantaged students, those with confidence, cultural capital, or institutional familiarity, it occupies the middle rungs of tokenism, where students are consulted but not empowered. In contrast, intentional inclusion of underrepresented voices creates the conditions for movement toward the upper rungs of partnership and delegated power, where influence is shared and diverse forms of knowledge shape outcomes. Within CEIAG, the failure to embed such inclusion risks transforming participatory rhetoric into a mechanism for reproducing social advantage, as programmes continue to reflect the aspirations, values, and experiences of those already best served by the system.

Participatory practice and the potential for citizen power

This final theme considers the extent to which student voice practices move beyond consultation towards meaningful partnership and shared decision-making. While previous themes have highlighted structural constraints, emotional risk, and inequitable representation, this section focuses on efforts to redistribute power. Several studies demonstrate emerging models of co-design and collaboration (Coney, 2023; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022), particularly in contexts where students are engaged not only in feedback but in shaping the very structures of their experience. Yet, even in these more progressive models, questions remain about the depth and consistency of power-sharing. Mapping these approaches onto the upper rungs of Arnstein's (1969) ladder ('partnership', 'delegated power', and 'citizen control') allows for a nuanced analysis of the extent to which student voice can function as a vehicle for social justice, particularly within the CEIAG landscape.

As previously described, Coney (2024) stands out for its commitment to co-production, allowing participants to choose modes of engagement and contribute to multiple stages of the research process. This level of flexibility signals a shift towards citizen control, particularly in how power was consciously shared and adapted. Despite many other studies aspiring to such levels of inclusion, the majority describe processes that fall short.

While Matthews and Dollinger (2022) promote a move from representation to partnership, they note that such efforts often remain bounded by institutional terms and conditions. In this sense, partnership may reflect Arnstein's mid-rung rather than truly delegated power. In a similar vein, although digital innovations such as the microblogging tool explored by Cook and Warwick (2023) aim to decentralise power, the analysis reveals tensions in how student contributions are acknowledged and actioned. Both studies recommend clearer communication of how input is used and ensuring voice leads to tangible change. Striving for processes in which the implications of student voice are made explicit, and that voices are heard as well as enabled, are positive steps towards authentic citizen control (Coney, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022).

Across even the most progressive examples, full delegation of power remains rare. Arnstein's ladder (1969) helps surface this distinction, as student voice efforts are often bound by educational agendas. Career education is uniquely positioned to engage students in shaping their futures, yet current participation structures often reflect institutional constraints. Hooley et al. (2021) offer a comprehensive framework in which to position career work, addressing the gaps discussed across the literature in the pursuit of truly emancipatory practice. When read alongside Arnstein, this provides both the diagnostic and transformative tools needed for emancipatory practice. The ladder exposes the hierarchy of control, while Hooley et al. offer principles for climbing it through care, collaboration, and social justice. Within CEIAG, this synthesis reframes 'citizen power' not as the end point of participation, but as an ongoing, justice-oriented process through which students and practitioners co-create meaning and possibility.

The following discussion reflects on the tensions across all themes, exploring their implications for future CEIAG research and practice, and considering how participatory approaches might be both expanded and critically refined.

Discussion

This integrative review set out to explore the nature and extent of student voice and participatory practices within the UK education system, with a particular focus on how these approaches might inform emancipatory models of career work. It addressed the question: To what extent do student voice and participatory practices in UK education reflect genuine power-sharing, and how might they be applied to enhance equity and impact in CEIAG? The thematic synthesis revealed complex factors affecting the authenticity and reach of student participation, including neoliberal constraints, emotional labour, and patterns of exclusion, all of which have significant implications for the development of socially just career work.

Grey sources vs academic literature

Alongside peer-reviewed literature, this review incorporated grey sources such as the DfE's guidance on student voice (2014) and the CEC's 2023–24 Insight Briefing. While these documents affirm a commitment to listening to young people, they often position voice as a means to improve engagement or satisfaction, rather than as a vehicle for social change. This stands in contrast to academic literature that critiques the superficiality of consultation models and emphasises the need for power redistribution (e.g. Hooley et al., 2021; Young & Jerome, 2020). The persistence of tokenistic participation is not simply procedural but ideological. Under neoliberal frameworks that value performance metrics and market responsiveness (Ball, 2012; Higdon, 2016), student voice is frequently commodified as feedback rather than dialogue. Within CEIAG, this translates into practices that measure satisfaction rather than redistribute power, reinforcing a consumerist rather than collaborative relationship between students and practitioners. Integrating these perspectives highlights the tension between policy narratives and frontline participatory realities, posing a key challenge for CEIAG professionals aiming to design truly inclusive guidance provision.

Synthesis of key themes

Across the four themes, a consistent tension emerged between the rhetoric of student voice and the realities of practice. While institutional strategies often emphasise inclusion and consultation (Career & Enterprise Company, 2024), this review found that such

efforts frequently remain constrained by structural hierarchies, individualised metrics of success, and limited frameworks for agency (Higdon, 2016; Moote & Archer, 2018). These constraints are not only pedagogical but ideological, shaped by neoliberal discourses that frame students as consumers and position staff as accountable deliverers of performance outcomes (Higdon, 2016; Young & Jerome, 2020).

A key insight arising from the synthesis is that tokenism is often not due to malice but results from tightly bounded systems in which time, capacity, and policy limitations inhibit deeper engagement. However, the outcomes (disillusionment, disengagement, and misrepresentation) are no less damaging (Nieminen et al., 2022). This raises critical questions for CEIAG, where student voice is rarely integrated beyond consultation, and yet the stakes for young people's futures are particularly high (Education Committee, 2023; Higdon, 2016).

Psychological safety emerged not only as a desirable condition for participation but as a structural requirement. Across the literature, students' willingness to share perspectives, and their interpretation of whether these perspectives are acted upon, was shaped by institutional culture, and the presence or absence of trust. The persistence of unsafe participatory environments reveals the depth of the structural and emotional labour involved in power-sharing. Across the literature, psychological safety is positioned as a precondition for authentic participation, yet most studies describe its absence rather than offer practical strategies for achieving it. This absence signals the continued dominance of performative accountability systems that privilege compliance over care. Through an ethically pragmatic lens, however, psychological safety can be understood not as a fixed condition but as a relational process that develops through trust, transparency, and mutual responsiveness. Studies such as Cook and Warwick's (2023) exploration of dialogic microblogging and Coney's (2023) participatory work with autistic students illustrate how small design choices (e.g. anonymity, asynchronous feedback, shared authorship) can incrementally construct safer spaces. Such practices do not eradicate power differentials but acknowledge them openly, converting awareness into ethical action. This suggests that the aspiration toward 'citizen power' is not naïve idealism but a necessary objective guiding trust-building change. For CEIAG to foster meaningful participation, strategies must go beyond listening to students. Rather they must demonstrate responsiveness, care, and reciprocity.

Furthermore, the synthesis revealed how existing mechanisms of student voice tend to reproduce existing inequalities (Hooley et al., 2021; Moote & Archer, 2018). Student representatives were often drawn from already empowered groups, and their visibility did not necessarily equate to wider inclusion. This has significant implications for career education, which often claims to support social mobility, yet may be informed by a narrow range of student perspectives. Without deliberate inclusion of underrepresented voices in the design of CEIAG provision, interventions risk entrenching structural advantage rather than disrupting it.

Empirical evidence indicates that student representation is not evenly distributed across social groups. Moote and Archer's (2018) longitudinal study of STEM engagement found that opportunities for student leadership and representation were dominated by middle-class, high-attaining students, while those from working-class backgrounds were often absent from decision-making spaces. Similarly, Young and Jerome (2020) observed that

confidence, communication style and familiarity with institutional norms shaped whose voices were amplified within feedback systems. These findings move beyond theoretical concern to establish the socially skewed nature of participation empirically. When viewed through Arnstein's (1969) lens, such practices occupy the lower rungs of the ladder, particularly the stages of consultation or placation, where participants are heard but have limited influence over outcomes. Apparent inclusivity therefore masks structural exclusion, as the power to define agendas and interpret 'voice' remains largely with staff and institutional gatekeepers. Recognising this positionality is essential if CEIAG is to progress toward genuinely redistributive, justice-oriented forms of participation.

Finally, a small number of texts (e.g. Coney, 2024) demonstrated the possibility of transformative practice through co-design, flexibility, and authentic power-sharing. These studies, while rare, highlight that citizen control is possible, but only when institutions are willing to share power, challenge normative hierarchies, and embrace ethical pragmatism. For CEIAG, this means moving beyond market-led, outcomes-driven models of guidance, and toward participatory, justice-oriented practices that recognise young people as active agents in shaping their futures.

Theoretical underpinning

This review was underpinned by Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation, chosen for its explicit focus on the redistribution of power. Across the thematic synthesis, the ladder provided a critical lens through which to analyse whether student voice practices reflected genuine shifts in power or remained at the lower rungs of tokenism and symbolic engagement. Arnstein's binary between citizen control and non-participation highlighted the degree to which participation is often constrained by structural inequality, limited inclusion, and institutional risk-aversion.

However, the synthesis also revealed several limitations in Arnstein's model, particularly when applied to the relational, emotional and ethical dynamics of education. The ladder's linear and hierarchical design does not fully account for the complex interplay of trust, identity, risk, and social capital that shapes students' willingness and ability to participate. Moreover, it lacks an explicit focus on intersectionality, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and the emotional labour of both students and staff. These are crucial omissions when applying participation theory to career education, where aspirations and outcomes are deeply embedded in social context and systems of power.

To ensure that the analysis captures both the structural and relational dimensions of participation, Arnstein's Ladder is applied here in conjunction with ethical pragmatism (Dewey, 1932; Frega & Levin, 2020) and Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen's (2021) socially just framework for career guidance. Whereas Arnstein exposes the distribution of power within participatory processes, ethical pragmatism foregrounds the quality of ethical action within those constraints, recognising that practitioners must navigate competing responsibilities and imperfect systems. Hooley et al.'s framework extends this synthesis by situating participation within the broader philosophy of social justice, emphasising the need to challenge structural inequities rather than simply increase engagement. Together, these frameworks allow for a multidimensional analysis: Arnstein provides the critical architecture for identifying where power resides, ethical pragmatism offers a compassionate, context-sensitive guide for action, and Hooley's signposts ground both within a justice-oriented

vision of CEIAG. This triangulation ensures that participation is understood not merely as a procedural goal, but as an ethical and political practice aimed at addressing rather than reproducing inequality.

Conclusion

This review explored how student voice and participatory practices in UK education reflect genuine power-sharing, and how these insights can inform socially just approaches to career education, information, advice, and guidance (CEIAG). Four key themes were identified: structural and ideological constraints; psychological safety and emotional labour; the politics of voice, choice, and agency; and the potential for participatory practice to reach Arnstein's (1969) higher rungs of participation (partnership, delegation, and citizen control).

Despite frequent policy promotion, student voice remains constrained by hierarchical cultures, market-driven accountability, and selective representation (Messiou et al., 2025; Scarparolo & MacKinnon, 2024). Psychological safety, often assumed rather than intentionally cultivated, proved essential for meaningful engagement, especially for marginalized students. Participation structures tend to amplify dominant voices, limiting inclusion. However, some studies showed that co-designed and inclusive approaches can foster authentic power-sharing (Coney, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023).

Implications for career work

The findings of this review offer significant implications for the design and delivery of socially just career education. Despite policy commitments to inclusivity and empowerment, student voice in CEIAG remains largely under-theorised and under-utilised. When present, it is often confined to consultation or post-hoc evaluation rather than embedded throughout the design, delivery and development of provision.

The participatory themes emerging from this review resonate strongly with broader interdisciplinary debates around power, voice, and agency. In social work (Beresford, 2007; Healy, 2005), youth studies (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Wood, 2014), and public policy (Cornwall, 2008; Hill & Hupe, 2009), there is a growing consensus that participation must go beyond symbolic inclusion and engage with the structural conditions that enable or suppress authentic voice.

The literature highlighted that students' capacity to engage with CEIAG meaningfully is shaped by structural and emotional factors, including institutional expectations, and students' prior experiences of being listened to or ignored. It also highlighted the necessity for caution in the assumption that student voice is an unequivocal good. Scholars such as Fielding, (2004), Cook-Sather (2007) and Mejias (2013) warn that student voice, if not critically examined, may serve to reinforce existing power dynamics under the guise of inclusion. In light of these findings, CEIAG practitioners and institutions should consider the following recommendations:

- **Embed student voice from the outset:** Approaches such as co-establishing the goals, language and delivery of CEIAG programmes, are likely to be more

empowering than end-point feedback mechanisms. Evidence from scholars on the effectiveness of participatory research tools such as causal loop diagrams (Brychkov et al., 2022) or collaborative curriculum audits (Elliott et al., 2021) shows that such approaches allow students to identify what support they actually need, rather than what is assumed they need. Practical application could involve piloting small-scale co-design workshops with a diverse group of students at the start of programme planning, then using their input to shape curricula before implementation.

- **Create psychologically safe opportunities to contribute:** To avoid reinforcing inequality, CEIAG must offer multiple, low-risk routes for participation. Cook and Warwick (2023) demonstrate that tools such as digital microblogging can provide anonymous, low-risk ways to contribute. However, students reported disappointment when their input was ignored. Such concerns could be mitigated by combining anonymity with visible responsiveness. For example, by displaying how student feedback has been actioned in follow-up sessions or sharing 'we heard, we did' reports with contributors.
- **Challenge dominant conceptions of 'appropriate' student voice:** The tendency to rely on high-achieving, institutionally literate students (e.g. prefects, award participants) as representatives risks reinforcing social advantage (Finneran et al., 2021; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). In contrast, Coney (2024) demonstrates that deliberately reaching out to underrepresented groups creates more equitable participation. More inclusive outreach is required to engage students who are underrepresented in CEIAG planning, including disabled students, those with competing responsibilities or from working-class backgrounds. Recruiting through multiple channels (e.g., community groups, targeted invitations, support services) and allowing students to choose modes of contribution (written, visual, digital) may reduce barriers to participation.
- **Make student voice consequential:** Where feedback is sought, it must be acted upon. Young people in the literature expressed frustration with cycles of consultation that resulted in no perceptible change (Nieminen et al., 2022; Young & Jerome, 2020). Transparency, follow-up, and even co-dissemination of findings (e.g. blogs, podcasts, assemblies) are essential for building trust and credibility.
- **Empower staff:** Teachers, career leaders and practitioners are often constrained by time, capacity and policy demands (Sutton Trust, 2024). Participation must therefore be made practical, purposeful, and non-onerous, built into existing practice rather than as an additional burden (Matthews et al., 2019). Thomsen (2017) emphasises that small-scale, iterative participation is more sustainable for practitioners than large, resource-heavy interventions. Resources such as low-burden, cost-free toolkits that share real student input and co-designed strategies may be vital to ensure uptake and sustainability.
- **Adopt an ethically pragmatic stance:** Recognising that not all participation is possible at all times, practitioners should be supported to make ethically sound decisions within given constraints (Dewey, 1932; Frega & Levin, 2020). Genuine participation therefore depends not on unrestricted autonomy but on honest negotiation of influence, echoing Cook-Sather's (2007) and O'Reilly et al.'s (2023) emphasis on relational trust and informed transparency. This includes being transparent with students about what is open to influence and what is not, fostering a participatory culture grounded in honesty and respect.

These suggestions offer a practical foundation for rethinking CEIAG design. Embedding ethical deliberation at each stage of participatory activity, from agenda-setting to evaluation, can help practitioners navigate the tensions between empowerment and institutional accountability. Such considerations do not dissolve constraint, but use it as a grounding for ethical action, aligning everyday practice with the pursuit of social justice.

This review integrates Arnstein's ladder, ethical pragmatism, and participatory action research principles to advocate for intentional, equity-driven participation in CEIAG, recognizing institutional constraints but emphasizing responsiveness and care.

As Freire states:

> Critical consciousness cannot be a hierarchical process... but must be a participatory process owned by the learners.
>
> (Freire, 1970/2005)

For CEIAG to be truly emancipatory, students must be empowered to move beyond consultation and become co-creators of the very systems shaping their futures.

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