THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF STUDENT VOICE:
CONFRONTING THE POWER ISSUES

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One of our background concerns is whether student voice research and development in schools is a passing fashion or a foundation for a new order of experience. There are two main arenas:

- Researchers who go into school to talk to students and who make public student perspectives on key areas of their experiences of learning and of the conditions of learning in schools; researchers demonstrate to a wide audience the capability of young people to comment insightfully on issues affecting their lives and work in school.

- Teachers within schools who are working to build a more inclusive community in which young people can contribute by, for example, evaluating, teaching and learning, by helping design units of work and by supporting the learning of their peers.

Harold Dent said, about fifty years ago, that it is not enough to teach about democracy; you have instead to enact it in the daily exchanges of life in school and classrooms (see Rudduck, 1999). We have identified aspects of the process of consulting students - or the process of developing frameworks for consulting students in schools - and we are focusing in this paper on the power issues that could limit the democratising potential of student voice.

**Who gets heard?**

The key issue is whose voice can be heard in the acoustic of the school, and by whom. Moreover, how what is said gets heard depends not only on who says it, but also on style and language. A student interviewed by Diane Reay in one of our Network projects said this: 'Some teachers act as if the child is stupid. Because they've got a posh accent, like they talk without 'innits' and 'mans' - like they talk proper English - and they say (to us), “That isn't the way to talk”, like putting [us] down'. And in a recent paper from the US, Mitra describes an American school where there was a working group of student researchers; progress was difficult because the more middle class students already spoke the language of management and the working class students felt they could not compete with a language which they recognised as the language of the establishment through which they themselves were managed and sometimes subjugated. The important point is that consultation processes can sometimes reflect rather than challenge the existing dividing practices in school and the systems for valuing some students above others.

Thus, to judge the potential of student voice for change we need to know who is talking and who is listening and whether such attentiveness is customary or spasmodic, an entitlement or a dispensation. We also need to know whether the listening is authentic.

**Trust and openness in the dialogue**

There are many silent or silenced voices - students who would like to say things about teaching and learning but who don't feel able to without a framework that legitimates comment and provides reassurance that teachers will welcome their comments and not retaliate. Here are two examples, the first from a student in an American school and the
second from a student in an English school:

_Sometimes I wish I could sit down with one of my teachers and just tell them what I exactly think about their class. It might be good, it might be bad, it's just that you don't have the opportunity to do it._ (Quoted by Shultz and Cook-Sather, 2001, p xii)

_One of my teachers, she is completely biased to girls. She doesn't like boys and it's not really very good because the boys never get asked questions, they never get picked for to do examples._ (Lanskey field notes, 2001)

In those two examples the students are sharing their frustration with the researcher but in the next they are making a distinction between what they are feeling about the lesson and what they can actually say to the teacher about the lesson. They are talking about the pace of learning being too slow:

_Jemima: You'll probably think to yourself, Oh hurry up please sir, you're driving me nuts! You feel like you've got to be in there until Christmas.
Kelly: I think if someone's going really slow I'd feel like saying, 'God sir, I'm not a snail, I'm not a dunce, ... I'm not dumb sir, we can take it going a bit faster' but (what) you (actually) say (is): 'Sir? Please can you go a bit faster, please?' being polite. (in Reay and Arnot, 2002)_

What students have to say about teaching and learning may be feared as personally challenging or as threatening to the institution. A strategy of the fearful is to limit student comment to aspects of school life which are seen as relatively safe or which do not have significant impact on the work of adults within the school, such as uniform, school meals or the colour of the classroom walls, but where do students talk about injustices that they experience or observe in the classroom and which they do not feel they have power to act on at the time?

It is usually only during the early stages of developing an institutional framework for consultation that these uncertainties and anxieties among teachers are likely to so prominent: teachers are moving from what some will have experienced as an us/them situation to one in which they are building a new kind of partnership in learning, what Michael Fielding has earlier called 'a radical collegiality'. But while these anxieties are understandable, Ben Levin (1999) has pointed out that the fear of students as 'revolutionaries', bent on undermining the system, is unfounded: most students' wishes he says, are 'modest, even timid. They do not seek to overthrow the system, or even to control it. They do, however, want to understand why things are done as they are. They would like to be able to voice their views about change and have them heard. They wish to have some more choice about how and what they learn'. These are all reasonable expectations. And, importantly, students want to be able to find and speak in their own voice:

_When I was younger I was quite ambivalent about God. I didn't care about religion ... now religion is put on us in such a forceful way that we violently disbelieve out of..._
spite.... We should not be told what to believe. Our opinion is never asked for and never matters'. (Earl's field notes, 2001)

And this is what an older US student said, looking back on her experience of schooling:
I have seen too many people trapped by listening to the voices in their heads that are not their own, reaching the miserable point when their own voices are lost for good amongst all the jumble. (Quoted by Schultz & Cook-Sather, 2001, p.xi)

Importantly, we have to ask whether the topics 'permitted' for discussion with the students in schools are ones that they see as significant and whether the discussions are occasions for genuine dialogue in which students can speak, without fear of retaliation, of concerns, passions and interests which are rooted in their developing sense of justice and of self.

Importantly again, if we are to build open and trusting relationships as a basis for constructive dialogue then students need, at the very least, to know what is happening as a result of what they have told the visiting researcher or the researching teacher in school: if they have made specific proposals, they need to know what is possible and what is not possible. As a Year 6 pupil said, in one of our projects, 'Miss, we've told you these things, but will it happen?'.

If the outcomes of within-school consultations are not fed back to and discussed by students, then it is difficult for them to appreciate the diversity of view that often exists within the group and the dilemmas posed by diversity for follow-up action. As Reay and Arnott have said (2002), 'There is no homogenous pupil voice even in a single working group but rather a cacophony of competing voices'.

Moreover, initiatives that seek student opinion on matters identified, framed and articulated by researchers or teachers and that do not lead to recognisable action, or discussion of possible courses of action, are unlikely to sustain their significance for students. They will soon tire of an increasing number of invitations (a) to express a view on matters they do not think are important, (b) are framed in a language they find restrictive, alienating or patronising, and (c) that seldom result in actions or dialogue that affects the quality of their lives. As Fielding and Pieto (2001) have said, 'we ... regard it as crucial for student perceptions and recommendations to be responded to, not merely treated as minor footnotes in an unaltered adult text'.

**Dilemmas of representing and interpreting the views of others**

As Shotter has said: '... no matter how benevolent we may be towards those we study, no matter how concerned with 'their' liberation, with 'their' betterment, with preventing 'their' victimisation, etc., the fact is that 'we' do not make sense of 'their' lives in 'their' terms. 'We' do not even make sense of 'their' lives with them. Indeed, the language of the adult, whether teacher or external researcher, may be used to reshape the language of the students and even in benign hands, the editorial power of the ethnographer remains high. As Ericson has said, 'Even the most richly detailed vignette is a reduced count, clearer than life ... it does not represent the original event itself, for this is impossible ... (it) is an abstraction; an analytic caricature (of a friendly sort) ... that highlights the author's interpretative perspective'. Humphries points to two particular dangers, that of
'accommodation' and 'accumulation'. Accommodation occurs when challenging ideas are modified so that they conform to and do not disturb the existing orthodoxy. For example, in one school, year 12 students were concerned, now that they were in 'the sixth form', to have more responsibility and say over things that mattered to them; but after dialogue with teachers, an agreement that was reached limited their aspiration to being able to choose the colour of the pullovers to be worn by year 12 students. Accumulation is not something that we have directly experienced: consultation works through deepening our understanding of marginalised groups, one of the possible consequences is that we could, if we so wished, use this information and understanding to exercise greater control over them. A more common experience for us is summed up by Hart in the well-known ladder of participation; at the bottom of the ladder are three rungs where consultation or participation are described as tokenistic, manipulative, or merely decorative:

- **Tokenism**: Children seem to have a voice but have little or no choice in the subject or style of communication and no time to formulate their own opinions.
- **Decoration**: Children used to promote a cause but have no involvement in organising the occasion.
- **Manipulation**: Adults consciously use children’s voices to carry their own message.

A more democratic approach to consultation would be characterised by agenda setting that is collaborative, by the involvement of students in the design of the research project (if research is appropriate); by discussion of methods of collecting information, and by the production of collective research knowledge. One indication of success would be the degree to which the solidarity of the group and its capacity to confront problems constructively is enhanced by the work.

**Creating new hierarchies**

As teachers who are working in traditional school cultures are finding, they have to start building their new 'community of learners' by working in a small-scale and relatively protected way with a few students who, once they gain in confidence, are often invited to 'display' their capacities for constructive analytic dialogue to other teachers, to the senior management team and even to governors and to conferences of teachers in other settings. The problem is that this pioneering group of students can become an elite, creating new hierarchies within the body of students itself. Their status is often rooted in competence in talk which may, in turn, be linked to social class differences.

**Comment**

Ivor Goodson observed that it was dangerous to believe 'that merely by allowing people to "narrate" that we in any serious way give them voice and agency’. Transformation requires an interruption to the regularities of school life - a rupturing of the ordinary - that enables teachers and students to 'see' alternatives; and it requires, ultimately, a coherent institutional commitment: '(It) will not happen by accident goodwill or establishing ad hoc projects. (It) requires new structures, new activities and the rethinking of the internal workings of each institution. It is a question of getting into a new perspective, the taken for granted regimes of school, the familiar patterns of relationship and the habits of
thought and values that they embody'. (Watson and Fullan, 1992)

Difficulties arise from the context of performativity and surveillance within which most teachers are now working and which make it especially hard to develop a dialogic approach. As Ian Frowe has said, '... the need to "get on" has infected the whole educational experience so that there is little or no time for genuinely open conversations through which children may have opportunities to develop their understanding and learning'. (Date) Children's learning can never be properly supported if teachers cannot find time to listen to them.

And yet listening is so worthwhile. Within our current ESRC/TLRP project, Consulting Students about Teaching and Learning, we have built up a body of data on the impact of consultation and participation on students. We would claim that it can offer:

- A stronger sense of membership (the organisational dimension) so that students feel more positive about school;
- A stronger sense of respect and self-worth (the personal dimension) so that students feel positive about themselves;
- A stronger sense of self as learner (the pedagogic dimension) so that students are better able to manage their own progress in learning;
- A stronger sense of agency (the political dimension) so that students realise that they can have impact on things that matter to them in school.

In the last twenty years or so, schools have changed less than young people have changed and schools need to reflect the different capabilities of this new generation of young people. The young people in our schools today are 'the first generation to have experienced, from their infancy, what Lyotard (1984) calls "computerisation of society"' (Kenway and Bullen, 2001). Called the Y Generation, they are said to have more money to spend, more opportunities for self-expression and the creation of different identities. Many seem to live the important parts of their lives out of school. It is not surprising therefore to hear comments like Nieto's from the US (date), 'educating students today is a far different and more complex proposition than it has been in the past'. We need a better fit between schools and students. And we need to respond to the repeated call from students for more responsibility, more opportunities to contribute to decision-making, more opportunities for dialogue about learning and the conditions of learning.

We asked, in the introduction, whether the current interest in student consultation and participation represents a passing fashion or a basis for a new order of experience. There may be a parallel in the theatre. A radical new form of drama emerged in the 1960s with Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, challenging and breathtakingly novel in setting and language. The traditionalists, 'in an effort to patronise it, contain it and kill it with the easiest instrument to hand - the convenient English weapon of class' - referred to it as 'kitchen-sink drama' (Hare, 2002). Will student voice experience the same kind of put down? Already it is gaining a different status from the one that we would want to support by its being linked to the Inspection process; situations where students are invited to talk *about* teachers, teaching and learning rather than with teachers about teaching and learning lead away from student voice as a building block for the school as a democratic learning community.
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