Beyond the Rhetoric of Student Voice: new departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st...

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Beyond the Rhetoric of Student Voice: new departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling?

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In the final contribution to this special issue, Michael Fielding, Reader in Education at the University of Sussex and FORUM Editorial Board member, develops a framework for evaluating the conditions for student voice. He draws on each of the contributors' articles and other research to explore some of the key issues beginning to emerge in a movement that has the dual capacity to either keep us even more securely in our current way of doing things, or develop genuinely transformative practices that offer the possibility of more creative, more fulfilling alternatives. Email contact: m.fielding@sussex.ac.uk

Work on student voice in schools, communities and universities is at an interesting crossroads. There is much talk about its importance, a rapidly growing research literature (see Fielding 2001b and Rudduck & Flutter 2000 for some useful references), much well-intentioned advocacy, and a very wide range of practice that has within it quite different intentions and aspirations for the future. Within the UK context, a mark of its importance is the funding of a major ESRC (Economic & Social Research Council) Network Project - Consulting Pupils About Teaching & Learning (see the back pages of this special issue for further details) - that forms part of the wider ESRC Teaching & Learning Research Programme. In other countries across the world there is also an equivalent growth of new practice and emerging research knowledge. This special issue of FORUM has contributions from South America (Chile) and North America (USA) and there are strong traditions elsewhere, e.g. in Australia (e.g. Comber & Thomson, 1999; Holdsworth, 2000a&b) and Canada (e.g. Levin, 1998, 2000a&b), that have been exploring and developing important new territory for some time.

What are we to make of it all? Are we witnessing the emergence of something genuinely new, exciting and emancipatory that builds on rich traditions of democratic renewal and transformation? Are we, as Jean Rudduck and Julia Flutter (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000) have recently asked via the beautifully crafted phrase of Maxine Greene, 'carving a new order of experience'? Or are we presiding over the further entrenchment of existing assumptions and intentions using student or pupil voice as an additional mechanism of control? What are some of the key questions we might ask to help us develop a more revealing and differentiated understanding of the apparent vogue for encouraging the voice of young people in school and community settings?

In attempting to answer these questions I draw both on the more usually encountered past and current examples of student voice work with which we are all familiar and on the ground-breaking developments explored by contributors to this special issue of FORUM. I take as my organisational structure nine clusters of questions that seek to probe the rhetorics and realities of student voice. Firstly, there is a set of questions about who is allowed to speak; secondly, who listens; thirdly, what skills are required and what support provided for their development; fourth, what attitudes and dispositions are needed to transform skills into meaningful realities; fifth, what systems are needed to sustain this kind of work; sixth, what kinds of organisational culture need to develop to enable student voice to thrive; seventh, what spaces, both physical and metaphorical, are needed for participants to make meaning together; eighth, what are the implications for action; and, finally, what are some of the key considerations to take into account in helping student voice to be and become a significant part of the process of communal renewal?

Speaking

• Who is allowed to speak?
• To whom are they allowed to speak?
• What are they allowed to speak about?
• What language is encouraged / allowed?

Many of the bright hopes of the student voice movement talk with enthusiasm and passion about students being able to speak about what matters to them, about the insights and understandings that many teachers and other adults had not thought young people capable of to any significant degree. And yet, when we stand back and ask questions not only about who is allowed to speak, but to whom their words can legitimately be addressed, what those students are allowed to speak about, what language is encouraged or admissible, then our advocacy has to face up to hard
realities that remain unevenly open to either the possibility or the practicalities of change.

Questions about who is allowed to speak remind us that encounters are always framed by the realities of power and that these matters are invariably significant, especially to those who seem to have less of it. Research presented in this issue of FORUM (see e.g. papers by Leora Cruddas and Elena Silva) and elsewhere (e.g. Arnot et al, 2001; McIntyre & Pedder, 2001) also reminds us that students are not all the same. To talk about student voice is misleading. Some voices (e.g. middle class girls) seem to be more willing to speak than others, partly because they may feel more at ease with the way teachers speak about students and with the capacity of schools to understand what matters to them in their daily lives. This more differentiated awareness of student voice thus raises issues of validity and the degree to which some students can legitimately speak on behalf of others. To what extent do the perceptions and intentions of students who are most often and most readily listened to reflect the experience of those students for whom school is an uncongenial or alienating place? As Elena Silva puts it, 'which students are representing the 'student voice' of their school? And in the context of reform, can these students who are best-served by the current set-up of their school possibly serve those students for whom school is an uncongenial or alienating place? As Elena Silva puts it, 'which students are representing the 'student voice' of their school? And in the context of reform, can these students who are best-served by the current set-up of their school possibly serve the interests of students who are least-served?'

Whilst it is true that issues of student voice(s) are more complex and more contested than the advocacy and the rhetoric often allows, it is also true that there is a growing recognition, firstly, that this is an issue that needs to be addressed and, secondly, that there is some evidence that headway is beginning to be made. Leora Cruddas gives exciting and insightful examples of marginalised students such as EBD girls becoming very involved in ways which begin to challenge stereotypes and construct new realities. The fact that this is happening outside mainstream and with the intervention of an external person to school does not detract from the obvious potential of such work. As one of the students remarked, 'I think it's sad that we have had to have this group just to voice our opinions. Don't teachers realise we've got opinions?' There are other examples of similar work taking place in Essex where the LEA have developed an exciting exploratory tradition with regard to student voice in special schools (see, for example, the work of Alan Fuller and Pete Dudley from the educational psychology service and the advisory service respectively).

To Whom are they Allowed to Speak?

To whom students are allowed to speak is also significant. Just as the possibility of my speaking face to face with the Minister for Education & Skills is remote, so too is the likelihood of students speaking face to face with those who hold equivalent power within their schools: who you talk to matters, and access to those who are able and willing to alter things in ways that step outside the tramlines of institutional hierarchy and habit too often remains a matter of luck and particular circumstance.

Despite the fact that in many schools not much seems to have changed for many years, there is some evidence that who students are now allowed to speak to is beginning to open up in new and interesting ways. Certainly, students are gathering more data through interviews, questionnaires and other imaginative means with a wider range of people (including teachers, parents, members of the community as well as fellow students) than they used to, though the dangers are that they are doing so largely on behalf of others (adults) and in the interests of others (adults). Questions of audience are not, however, just confined to the data gathering stage. Arguably of much greater importance, and thus, unsurprisingly, still less frequently encountered, are occasions when meaning is made from the data, conclusions drawn from it, and action invited, all within the context of dialogue and discussion between students and (senior) staff. The 'Students as Researchers' work at Shambrook Upper School has travelled a long way down this path (see papers by Beth Crane, Chris Harding, and Louise Raymond in this issue and Worrall et al, 1999) and many aspects of primary practice in this area seem to be challenging traditional boundaries (see e.g. Peacock, 2001, and Wheatcroft Primary School in this issue).

What are they Allowed to Speak About?

For students in most schools, what you are allowed to speak about is, either by way of self-censorship or organisational guidance, more often than not confined to the relatively restricted matters of lunch breaks, discos and school trips. Teaching and learning remain largely forbidden areas of enquiry and if either are allowed into the circle of discussion, the questions and concerns that are raised are invariably identified and framed by teachers for teachers: students, as Louise Raymond in this issue and myself (Fielding 1998, 2001b) have argued are primarily treated as sources of data rather than agents of transformation.

However, there are signs of progress. In the article by students at Wheatcroft Primary School they talk about ways in which the research with their teachers has looked at matters to do with the nature of learning, not just in its narrowly conceived terms of test scores, but also in terms of its wider and more profound human sense of making meaning from and with the world around them. They remind us of the bodily preconditions (hunger!) and the emotional foundations (friendship, showing your feelings) for learning, as well as the range of ways it can be encouraged e.g. 'I believe that you can learn without writing' (Charlotte Y6). They remind us both of the necessity of difference e.g. 'Lots of children are different - and it is important to ask their points of view and how they learn best' (Coral Y6) and the companion necessity of community e.g. team working, working with other people, taking responsibility for each other, the centrality of relationships in human learning. They remind us not only that they are as aware as adults of issues of power, belonging and significance, e.g. the blight of bullying, but also that they are more than capable of taking action in a concerted and communal way to address the challenges that they face e.g. the development of a system of playground buddies. They remind us, too, that the values of community as the precondition for the development of our being as persons can and should shape, not just the ambience but the organisational realities of schools: 'We do not believe in putting people into groups according to ability. Therefore everybody gets the same opportunity.' (Oliver Y6). Here, students and staff who form the
learning community of the school remind us of the fundamental necessity of equal value in an education system that is beginning to lose its capacity to understand or articulate what those values and perspectives look and feel like in the well-intentioned, but largely destructive, scramble for performance. Lastly, and in the current context of performance-obsessed earnestness, perhaps most importantly, they reclaim the existential realities of human experience e.g. ‘We can have fun and be educated at the same time’ (Fay Y5). It is interesting, too, that the manner in which they raise these issues reminds us that there are alternatives to the barrenness and boredom of bullet point thinking that has so bruised our imagination and bullied our prose into a debilitating and impatient brevity e.g. ‘I would like to tell the whole world about how important it is to let children have fun in school ... (so it does not become) a dungeon trapped in its own dullness, a prison blowing away fun and school trips, sucking out laughter and playful.’ (Alison Y6)

What Language Is Encouraged/Allowed?

Even if the traditional taboos and restrictions on the topics of discussion are lifted there is then a further issue about the language that students are encouraged or allowed to use to articulate their concerns and enthusiasms. In their fascinating account of new developments currently being researched as part of a large ESRC (Economic & Social Research Council) project John MacBeath, Kate Myers and Helen Demetriou argue strongly for the importance of language and the need for children to have a conceptual vocabulary not only to articulate their views but to be able to recognise them and for the necessity of ‘teachers themselves having that vocabulary and acquiring the expertise to make it accessible to their pupils.’

A different kind of challenge concerns our response as teachers to those who side-step or marginalise such developments. Even if we open up new spaces to students, how willing are we to concede the legitimacy of their own way of expressing themselves? How widespread is the truth of Leora Crudats’s claim that ‘some young people may not express opinions and ideas in ways that adults find acceptable’? Do we require a formal language which students are encouraged or allowed to speak the public language of the school, then that is inquisitorial or exploitative or if students are overwhelmed by the enormity of the issue facing us. Sara Bragg did learn a great deal from her students and they from her; Paul Doherty did come to understand the nature of disaffection better and go on to develop a new theory of disaffection-as-disengagement from which we can all learn. The reform leadership team Dana Mitra describes did understand the insight and power of ‘student speak.’ There are also positive examples within this issue of FORUM of ways in which students have been able to articulate what matters to them in ways that are their own rather than other people’s.

In addition to Dana Mitra, two other international contributors to this special issue exemplify this point well. Firstly, the lyricism, energy and insight of one of Elena Silva’s student reform group is palpable: ‘We got squeaky wheels and flat tires ... Some smooth white walls rollin’ their way right to college, gettin’ oil all the way. And then the rest of us ... flat tires! Bumpin’ on down the road, making all sorts of rude noises. Probably fall off real soon anyway. Ain’t worth the grease.’ Secondly, Marcia Prieto’s ground-breaking work developing democratic practices with students in Chilean secondary (high) schools included innovative forms of data collection that the students themselves developed to gain access to the views and feelings of their fellow students. The language, the manner and the place of student interviewing were all significantly shaped by the perception that students were unlikely to open up, even with other students, unless they felt discursively at ease.

Listening

• Who is listening?
• Why are they listening?
• How are they listening?

If new approaches to student voice are beginning, slowly, hesitantly, but with increasing confidence, understanding and legitimacy to widen the scope both of who is allowed to speak, what they are allowed to speak about, and how they are allowed to speak about it, what then can we say about who listens, why they listen and how they do so? These questions are no less contested and complex than those to do with speaking: speaking and listening must inevitably condition each other reciprocally if they are to form the basis of vibrant learning and the possibility of significant change.
Who is Listening?

Too often the answers to questions about who is listening, why they are listening and how they do so makes depressing reading. Those in power too often do not listen, even if they hear what is said. The student council that is tokenistic (MacBeath & Mortimore, 2001; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000) because nobody in a position of power takes their recommendations or comments seriously is a phenomenon as old as schools councils themselves (see Chapman 1970, 1971 and Fielding 1973 for examples of work on school councils that predate the current upsurge of interest). The contemporary equivalent has a number of forms such as student focus groups and questionnaires about matters that concern teachers, governments and almost anyone other than students themselves. Here, though there is often an appearance of student involvement, the capacity to raise questions and issues that arise from students' own perceptions of the realities of their experience of schooling is even more restricted than participation or demonstrating compliance to the recurrent imperatives (appropriation) (see Fielding, 1998). Even where that is not the case, the worry is that the frameworks of performativity provide both the motive and the means of a carefully constrained consultation. If teachers are constantly having to demonstrate their success to an incessant, humanly diminishing accountability in ways which are easily measured, instantly understood and interminably recorded, small wonder that recourse to 'student voice' is seen as a means of heading off difficulty or demonstrating compliance to the recurrent imperatives of the market. In these circumstances the 'why' of listening has more to do with personal survival, an astute response to an additional means of surveillance, than it has to do with recognition of student insight or the possibility of mutual learning.

In contrast, a positive reading of the emergence of new practices in which students and teachers explore and research issues of common concern and interest together (students as co-researchers) or ones in which students identify issues and research them with teachers in the role of research assistants and facilitators (students as researchers) point to a quite different set of answers to questions of why and how teachers listen to student voices.

Following the work of Beth Humphries (Humphries, 1994), I would suggest that too often those in power are listening because through that process they gather more information which can then be used to enhance the process of containment and control (accumulation), or assist in the process of re-describing or reconfiguring students in ways that bind them more securely to the status quo (accommodation), or indeed, reaffirm their powerful in their superiority and confirm students in their existing lot (appropriation) (see Fielding, 1998). Even where that is not the case, the worry is that the frameworks of performativity provide both the motive and the means of a carefully constrained consultation. If teachers are constantly having to demonstrate their success to an incessant, humanly diminishing accountability in ways which are easily measured, instantly understood and interminably recorded, small wonder that recourse to 'student voice' is seen as a means of heading off difficulty or demonstrating compliance to the recurrent imperatives of the market. In these circumstances the 'why' of listening has more to do with personal survival, an astute response to an additional means of surveillance, than it has to do with recognition of student insight or the possibility of mutual learning.

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Within these regimes listening is important because it has to do with the nature of learning itself and its relationship with teaching that helps learning to emerge.

Firstly, listening is a prerequisite for students learning for themselves: students need to listen to each other in order to learn from each other, for each other and for themselves. As the Chilean student researchers said in Marcia Prieto's paper, 'We have learned how to share our own ideas, to respect the other's opinion and value those thought differently.' Students also need to listen to their teachers, to others who care for them, and to their own voices emerging in dialogue with others. This is clearly a feature of buddying systems and peer learning as well as the more mainstream activities that take place on a daily basis in classrooms.

Secondly, if as a teacher you are able to listen to what your students say, what they feel, then you are more likely to understand what will help them to learn. For Charlotte at Wheatcroft Primary School 'listening to children is vital so that children are happier and teachers know what they like and what they can do', whilst Matthew is in no doubt that he 'would prefer this school to any others because the teachers have time for you.' If things get in the way of that process it becomes increasingly hard to engage in teaching as an educative process. If you are prevented from listening you cannot pursue learning as a joint undertaking or teaching as a human encounter.

Thirdly, in these new ways of working teachers are listening, not just to understand, but to learn: learn more
about their students; learn more about their teaching; learn more about the nature of learning. John MacBeath, Kate Myers and Helen Demetriou provide some very interesting preliminary findings that point to children 'searching for meaning' and teachers palpably demonstrating the quality of their own reflectiveness. This attentiveness and the responsiveness that partners it exemplify the necessity of dialogue and, by implication, the poverty of 'delivery' as a metaphor or reality of contemporary approaches to teaching and learning. It also points to the emergence of what I have elsewhere called a 'radical collegiality' (Fielding, 1999), that is a collegiality in which teachers learn with and from their students as well as from their fellow teachers. In Louise Raymond's view the 'Students as Researchers' initiative 'has been profoundly important in terms of staff members' professional development as regards changing the way they think about their lessons and working with students in different ways to make learning better.' In the joint undertaking of enquiry both students and teachers are equal partners in the emergence of new knowledge which they create together. In Beth Crane's view the Students as Researchers project at Sharnbrook Upper School 'changed how some staff at the school considered their students, encouraging them to think of students more as equals, as a source of help in making the most of their teaching.' In Marcia Prieto's 'Students as Researchers' project in Chile 'students working as equals with university staff with the same rights to propose and to decide was an essential feature of the team.' Lastly, listening is important because it is central both to a wider and deeper commitment to the development of agency in a democratic society and to our sense of human solidarity, to our emergent humanity as an achievement which certain kinds of relationships and circumstances can either enable or frustrate. Thus, for Andrew, 'Wheatcroft has helped me to be me and without the support I have received I would have been upset and depressed' and for Clare it is important to have your voice heard because it 'makes you feel free.' For Beth Crane, Students as Researchers 'changed how students thought of themselves. They came to feel like a more valued and respected resource and to recognise that they were actually an education knowledge base.' For the Chilean research team, 'The experiences lived by working as real partners with students reminded us of the necessity of treating them and respecting them, not only as equals, but also as people that have something different and important to offer.'

Skills

- Are the skills of dialogue encouraged and supported through training or other appropriate means?
- Are those skills understood, developed and practised within the context of democratic values and dispositions?
- Are those skills themselves transformed by those values and dispositions?

Are the Skills of Dialogue Encouraged and Supported through Training or Other Appropriate Means?

One of the standard objections to increased calls for student voice in the narrative of schooling has been, and still is, that students lack the capacity or the skills to articulate what is important, insightful or relevant to anything other than the more trivial or insignificant of matters. Such a line of argument is becoming increasingly suspect, though there is little sign that its proponents acknowledge its demise.

There are, of course, at least two different kinds of response to such a position, both of which are born out in the research presented within this issue of FORUM. The first is that if students are given no support in developing the skills of dialogue then it is hardly surprising that they sometimes struggle to demonstrate their skills in this domain. The second is that, where they have been given the opportunity to develop these capacities, they more often than not demonstrate they are in fact very capable.

Are Those Skills Understood Developed and Practised within the Context of Democratic Values and Dispositions?

Skills are important, but they are not, and have never been, enough. Arguably, the most profound failing of New Labour government policy in education was, and continues to be, its refusal to understand the inadequacy of predominantly technical solutions (teaching as delivery) to more profound human challenges (learning as a collaborative making of meaning). Unless teachers and students see the skills and capacities associated with the growth of student voice as integrally connected with the practical realities of democracy and democratic citizenship in the lived, day-to-day context of real schools as they exist now, then those skills will turn out to be virtually worthless. They will quickly become ephemeral tricks that not only have no genuine significance for those who use them, but, just as importantly, for those on whose behalf they have been developed. They might occasionally be handy for the emerging CV or UCAS (university entrance) form. But this is to reduce the richness of a vibrant public resource to the poverty of a private possession. Interestingly, in the concluding section of her paper Beth Crane points beyond the skills of research to the wider and deeper fulfilment of democratic communal engagement: 'The feeling of giving something back to the school, my fellow students and future students in an ongoing way was fantastic' Certainly, for the Chilean student researchers, the thing that mattered 'most of all' was the desire 'to construct a better society in which everyone was committed to the rights, duties and responsibilities of democratic living.'

Attitudes and Dispositions

- How do those involved regard each other?
- To what degree are the principle of equal value and the dispositions of care felt reciprocally and demonstrated through the reality of daily encounter?

How Do Those Involved Regard Each Other? To What Degree are the Principle of Equal Value and the Dispositions of Care Felt Reciprocally and Demonstrated through the Reality of Daily Encounter?

The importance of transforming skills through particular kinds of disposition into something that ceases to be a mere skill and becomes instead a practical expression of an educational relationship and a democratic way of life
has always been and will always be hard. But it is equally true that it has been and always will be possible, has been and always will be necessary.

Too often, and inevitably, developments in the field of student voice founder because the teachers and other adults involved do not believe in their hearts, and therefore in the felt realities of their actions, that student voice is important, or, indeed, that some students are important. As one of the young women Leora Cruddas worked with put it, 'it's the way they (the teachers) talk to us. We're not dirt you know.' For many teachers, student voice is seen as either peripheral, irrelevant or corrosive of the already diminishing legitimacy of teacher professionalism. As we have already noted, for many students, too, student voice is, at best, something a small number of other students, often not like them, do with a small number of other students, often not like other teachers, to no good effect. Fellow students are seen as 'boffins', or other marginalised equivalents, and teachers are seen in stereotypical ways that retain traditional roles and demarcations. In other words, the comfort of the status quo often suits more students and teachers than the more demanding alternatives that are beginning to emerge.

However, it does not have to be like that. What comes through again and again from those teachers and students involved in these new ways of working as the centrality of certain kinds of human relationships within the process of education. Sara Bragg insists that 'it was the quality of our relationship - its intensity and its fierce ambivalence - that motivated me to seek answers to the puzzles they posed'; Perpetua Kirby underscores the necessity and power of a dialogic relationship between students and teachers involved in participatory research; and Leora Cruddas rightly reminds us of the importance of Ken Robinson's affirmation that, 'At the heart of education is the relationship between teachers and learners and by extension the relationship between learners - young people themselves.' (Robinson, 2001, p. 101) This was certainly one of the most striking things about the children's account of the student voice work at Wheatcroft Primary school where there is a strong sense of children and teachers working and learning together.

There have always been gifted and committed individual teachers who have pioneered student voice work in their own classrooms and sometimes in their own schools. But the burden of setting up such approaches and keeping them going, frequently in hostile internal and external circumstances, often proves too much. Even when they do manage to gain some degree of institutional support the initiatives these colleagues create too often founder with their departure or their exhaustion. Hence the importance of systems.

**How often does dialogue and encounter in which student voice is centrally important occur? Who decides?**

It is, of course, true that systems alone cannot accomplish significant change. How many school councils can we all think of that have flourished for a while but have subsequently declined from their former vibrancy and engagement with real issues into a mechanistic and largely tokenistic set of procedures for recycling the minimal and predictable minutiae of the status quo? However, systems remain important. One of the key issues, if not in the emergence then certainly in the continuation and incorporation of student voice as a characteristic of the school as a learning community, has to do with the systems and structures that are created to give it public status and system-wide impact. The PLP (Personal Learning Planning) initiative explored by Kate Bullock and Felicity Wikeley shows promising signs of having an impact in some schools, partly because they were developing a systemic approach and partly because, 'learning was necessary for tutors as well as students. A one-to-one dialogue is clearly a learning opportunity for teachers, as well as students, and needs to be heralded as such.' Systems that show signs of success seem to be those where dialogue is emerging as a central feature of their way of working.

In the UK, school councils have recently enjoyed a revival and not just because citizenship has become part of the National Curriculum. There have also been a number of other important additions to whole school approaches to student-led and student informed practices, often connected to the emergence of emotional literacy and emotional intelligence, that are part of how schools conduct their daily work together. Peer-led counselling, buddying, and the now widely practised circle time are the most prominent examples.

**How do the systems enshrining the value and necessity of student voice mesh with or relate to other organisational arrangements (particularly those involving adults)?**

One of the most interesting challenges which such developments encounter has to do with, not just their sustainability and the degree of support both students and teachers are prepared to give them, but crucially with how these new arrangements map on to the existing mechanisms for consultation and renewal that exist for e.g. the teachers in the school. In other words, what is the connection between the arrangements for student voice and for teacher voice within the school? Do the two systems exist alongside each other without any overt connection between them? Or do they inform and sustain each other, either covertly or in ways which the school chooses to celebrate in public? It seems pretty clear that these are the next steps that need to be considered if student voice is to be woven into the fabric of school life, rather than being a decorative motif that can be removed as and when the occasion and the judgement of (head)teachers demands.

**Organisational Culture**

- Do the cultural norms and values of the school proclaim the centrality of student voice within the
context of education as a shared responsibility and shared achievement?

- Do the practices, traditions and routine daily encounters demonstrate values supportive of student voice?

It is clear from the discussion of systems, that systems are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the kinds of changes which advocates of student voice suggest we should implement. Michael Fullan was one of the first to help us to understand that reculturing must precede, or at least be concurrent with, restructuring. In other words, if we are to successfully introduce new ways of working and sustain them with organisational arrangements that help them to thrive beyond the single individual or the single classroom, then we need to develop different attitudes and dispositions which will make them a felt necessity, rather than an imposed requirement. Whilst we are clearer about the necessity of reculturing, making it real remains more difficult than we would want and less clear than we would wish. There are nonetheless, interesting examples emerging from the work described in this Special Issue of FORUM. Dana Mitra talks of the importance of 'taking several steps to scaffold the process of student participation in the previously teacher-only domain of school change.' My own experience of working with Sharnbrook Upper School over the five years in which 'Students as Researchers' has grown from an interesting initiative to a central component of the school's approach to curriculum and organisational renewal suggests that great care needs to be taken, not only to be open and honest, but actively solicitous of the experience and expertise, not just the articulated opinion, of members of staff. What is also clear is that the development of student voice at the expense or to the exclusion of teacher voice is a serious mistake. The latter is a necessary condition of the former: staff are unlikely to support developments that encourage positive ideals for students which thereby expose the poverty of their own participatory arrangements.

**Spaces and the Making of Meaning**

- Where are the public spaces (physical and metaphorical) in which these encounters might take place?
- Who controls them?
- What values shape their being and their use?

If we start to take matters of structure and culture seriously, if we start to move beyond the mere inculcation of skills and embrace matters of attitude and disposition, then potentially at any rate, at this point in the long journey of student voice within the context of public education, we stand a good chance of moving into a qualitatively different phase of its development.

**Where are the Public Spaces (Physical and Metaphorical) in Which These Encounters Might Take Place? Who Controls Them? What Values Shape their Being and their Use?**

It seems to me that the success or otherwise of this transition rests significantly on the extent to which we are able to move towards a circumstance in which we construct new practices and create new spaces (physical and metaphorical) within which we (students, teachers and others) can make meaning together. Schools are currently awash with data, most of which is externally driven and much of which is tangential to the core purposes of schools as educational institutions. Much is only partially understood by those to whom it refers and is too often an impediment to furthering the very things it intends. Making meaning is too often forestalled by the exhausted satisfaction of having collected an impressive, if largely meaningless, array of data.

Even within the student voice movement there is far too much that turns out, despite good will, much effort and considerable dedication, to be cumulative data of varying quality and uncertain meaning. What we have too little to say about is how meaning is made from data. Is meaning constructed in dialogue or delivered on a spreadsheet? Is meaning made or masked by the confidence and crispness of presentation? Making meaning from the data is as important as collecting it in the first place: unless we struggle with the difficult, but immensely rewarding, process of making sense of the information we have collected then our effort and our commitment will be much less fruitful than it could or should have been.

There are at least two issues here. Firstly, how do we support student voice initiatives in the process of making meaning from their work? Secondly, how does the school enable students and teachers to come together in public ways and public places to engage in dialogue about issues emerging from their research and/or their deliberations? Tackling the first issue is essential if the quality of student research and deliberation is to carry conviction with their peers and their teachers. Tackling the second issue is potentially transformational: it has within it the possibility of schools becoming learning communities in which the voices of students and teachers (and others) are acknowledged as legitimately different and of equal value, the necessary partners in dialogue about how we learn, how we live and the kind of place we wish our community to become.

**Action**

- What action is taken?
- Who feels responsible?
- What happens if aspirations and good intentions are not realised?

**What Action is Taken? Who Feels Responsible? What Happens If Aspirations and Good Intentions are Not Realised?**

Having made meaning, having worked through the range of what is possible and what is desirable, we then need to act: as the philosopher John Macmurray has it, 'all meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action' (Macmurray 1957 p. 15). If there is one lesson to be learned from both the history of student voice initiatives and from the new wave of current research and development work it is that action is necessary. The scepticism of Isobel Urquart's interviewees in asking 'If there's anything that they can do, will it happen?' is both predictable and legitimate and makes the less frequently encountered contrast of Chris Harding's experience all the more remarkable. For him it was the engagement in collective change processes and the school's capacity to
act on the recommendations of the research, in this case on the system of assessment and profiling, 'that gave me a great sense of achievement.'

It may be that the action recommended or hoped for is not possible or not agreed by those who are in a position to make final choices. But action, if only in terms of a considered and public response, remains a necessary consequence of the collective endeavour in which the voices of students spoke with conviction and determination. Perpetua Kirby reminds us that 'often too much emphasis is on peer research being positive for the participating young researchers and too little on how this will impact on the many respondents they research.'

The most satisfactory arrangements I have come across are ones in which it is agreed by the headteacher / principal, the senior management team, the governing body / board, or whoever carries the decision making powers of the school with regard to the issue in question, that a proper professional response to the report or recommendations is both an obligation and a requirement. This does not bind those in power to agree to what is being suggested; it does, however, bind them to the seriousness and the delight of dialogue in, usually public, ways that both honour and learn from students' work and their contribution to the furtherance of the school as a learning community in a democratic society.

The Future

• Do we need new structures!
• Do we need new ways of relating to each other?

Student Voice in the Context of Schooling as Performance

It is still too early to make a reasonable judgement about whether or not the current wave of interest in student voice has within it the seeds of transformation. On the one hand, there is much that suggests an uncomfortably conformist and controlling reading of these new developments. On the other hand, at its best and most adventurous, there is much to be optimistic about in the emerging student voice movement: there does seem to be a small number of examples of 'prefigurative practice' (Dale & Fielding 1989), that is to say, groundbreaking practice that anticipates the future now and has within it the capacity, not only to inspire, but also to sustain developments until the wider society moves more confidently in the direction suggested.

In the first of these two scenarios an increasing advocacy of student voice is best understood as a constructivist version, of total quality management (Dahlberg et al 1999 p.95). Here the voice of the student becomes the voice of the customer disciplining the teacher into the pre-ordained imperfectly internalised competences of government edict and market responsiveness. Here the rigours of performance culture deepen the accountability and responsiveness of teachers as pedagogic technicians and sustain a notion of students as the collectors of educational products (test results, certificates, saleable skills) that 'add value' to their employment prospects. Under these conditions student focus groups and questionnaires are unlikely to produce anything that transgresses broadly accepted, if more flexibly interpreted, notions of what it is teachers and students should be doing. Despite our initial enthusiasm, it is unlikely that the framework which sustains and animates this more active and more strident student voice will do anything other than confirm what we presently think and require a more intensively pursued version of what we currently try to do.

Students are as much the products of a society that thinks and speaks of education as a set of commodities to be delivered as those who teach within it: hence the importance of Leora Cruddas's warning that we should be careful not to assume young people are 'free to represent their own interests transparently.' She, along with other contributors to this Special Issue, also reminds us that students are a gender differentiated group. The realities of race and class are also insistently important: the elegance and insight of Elena Silva's cautionary remarks will not go away just because we are passionately committed to transformative ideals: 'we must recognise that the school's embossed invitation to participate looks unfamiliar, unattractive, or out of reach to many students, especially those most in need of serious changes at their school.'

Finally, even if we engage in increasingly insightful and welcoming ways to the range of voices that articulate something of what our students think and feel about the multiple realities of 21st Century schooling, the pressures of performance carry with them the partialities of presumption and the predilection for, often premature, closure. Sara Bragg's concern that 'the pressure of needing rapid results may lead us to listen most readily to voices that make immediate sense' has a wide-ranging resonance. Her plea that we 'take our time with the anomalous, to allow what doesn't fit or produces unexpected reactions in us to disrupt our assumptions and habitual ways of working - because ... it is from these that we may, in the end, learn most' stands little chance of realisation in a context where the timeline within which we have to understand and demonstrate 'what works' is conditioned by imperatives that have an increasingly short attention span. The patience and attentiveness for which she argues are only sustainable in contexts where performativity is either contained or replaced by a more robust, more self-consciously education-centred professionalism.

Student Voice and the Development of New Communities of Practice

In contrast to this rather chilling prospect, there are a few signs that an alternative scenario is hesitatingly beginning to emerge, albeit in isolated pockets, often supported by universities or external consultants. Groups of teachers and students together are gradually creating new realities that speak a different language that names quite other possibilities. Not only does it offer teachers and students an opportunity 'to revitalise a dialogue', in the words of Isobel Urquart, it also 'offers teachers and others a creative practical alternative to the adult-centred bureaucracy that "cramps" much of modern schooling.'

Furthermore, in what I earlier called this 'prefigurative practice' teachers and students are not confined by agendas set by governments or markets. Of course, they acknowledge their importance and meet what requirements their circumstances demand. However, they go beyond what is currently required to create a quite different present, a present that has within it a future that is more securely centred on the development of persons in...
and through community, rather than the growth of consumers in and through the market. Insofar as students and teachers do this together, their practices are 'transitive', transgressive, emancipatory, creative of quite different realities to those we are currently required to emulate: 'Children and adults combine power and create new forms of wisdom when they explore learning together' (Lincoln, 1995, p. 89). What is described in some of the contributions to this issue of FORUM, what is beginning to happen in a number of other schools and colleges, both here in the UK and in North America, South America and Australasia, has within it the possibility of new communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998), new ways of working, new ways of learning to be and become persons that make very different demands on students and teachers. What we see, in Marcia Prieto's words, is the emergence of 'very different kinds of partnership between students and teachers' in which 'each needs the other in much more searching and exhilarating ways than we currently acknowledge or fully understand.' The accepted roles of student and teacher become less mutually exclusive, more open to extension and reversal, more open to mutual learning, more welcoming of a radical collegiality (Fielding, 1999).

On the Necessity of Intervention

Which of these two directions student voice work takes in the next few years is difficult to gauge. The likelihood is that the context of performativity will give a substantial boost to the former rather than the latter: students may well become increasingly vocal and demanding, their language replicating the discourse of performance and their requirements fitting ever more snugly within the templates of accepted 'good practice'. Whilst not necessarily a disaster, such a future runs the risk of being increasingly fraught and sadly disappointing for all concerned. In it, teachers would become threatened where they could be invigorated, defensive where they could be open and exploratory; students would become unevenly engaged and ungenerous in their understanding of their teachers, themselves and the possibility of schooling as an educative process.

The alternative is that we develop new communities of practice shaped by an essentially dialogic form of engagement. This emphasis on dialogue and the communal is important and, in my view, essential. As Jean Rudduck and Julia Flutter have recently reminded us, it is important to 'explore the need for change with pupils themselves - what Ted Aoki (1984) called a communal venturing forth'; the discussion of purpose, he said, was a precondition of working effectively together' (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, p. 84) Teachers cannot create new roles and realities without the support and encouragement of their students: students cannot construct more imaginative and fulfilling realities of learning without a reciprocal engagement with their teachers. We need each other to be and become ourselves, to be and become both learners and teachers of each other together. As Yvonna Lincoln reminds us with characteristic insight and eloquence, "Teachers can elicit student voices. And teachers can, in the process, be led to discover their own voices. One cannot happen without the other, but happily the achievement of voice is mutual, and teachers who help students to find student voices will discover that their own voices are clearer and stronger in the process. (Lincoln, 1995, p. 93).

We will not get anywhere unless we start from a different set of assumptions and understandings to those that dominate contemporary thinking and thereby ensure the disappointments and frustrations that, in the UK at least, are currently resulting in the flight from teaching and the alienation from a heavily scripted form of learning. The discourse of 'delivery' is emblematic of the intellectual poverty and effective incarceration of our professional judgement and our daily desire: our passion for teaching; our delight in what we might be and become together with those for whom we have and share daily responsibility; these necessary ingredients of a lived and living commitment to education struggle to find a voice amid the clutter of criteria and the tyranny of targets (Fielding, 2001a).

The student voice movement has within it the possibility of educational transformation: to achieve this potential we will have to discard the now moribund framework of school effectiveness and embrace a view of education which understands that the means of our engagement cannot sensibly be separated from the nature of our aspirations. The narrow instrumentalism of the high performance school must give way to the more widely conceived aspirations of a person-centred education (Fielding 2000a&b).

References


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