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Leadership, Radical Collegiality and the Necessity of Person-Centred Education

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Introduction

There is mounting evidence from a wide range of countries in Australasia, North America and the United Kingdom that consulting young people about their experience of schooling is moving from the periphery towards the centre of government attention. There is a ‘new wave’ of what many now call ‘student voice’ ranging over a huge vista of activities encouraging the involvement of young people which echoes the energy, if not the aspirations, of the 1960s and 1970s (Fielding 2005). These range from the familiar engagement with social and interpersonal matters (e.g. prefects, buddying, mentoring, coaching, and traditional school councils), through more innovative, often student-led developments (e.g. school ambassadors, student-led learning walks, lead learners, student leaders, students as co-researchers and lead researchers, and more radical forms of student council), to a burgeoning range of ways in which professional perceptions about the suitability and performance of staff are significantly informed by student perspectives and judgements (e.g. students as observers, students on staff appointment panels, students as governors / school board members, student focus groups and surveys, and students as key informants in the processes of external inspection and accountability).

How might we read these developments? What are the implications for leadership in schools and how might we move beyond the compilation of a list, however long and impressive, to a more intellectually discriminating understanding of what appears to be taking place? In attempting just such an undertaking I begin by acknowledging the value of a number of theoretical readings, but opt instead for a four-fold typology of my own which, I shall argue, gets to the heart of what I regard as a significant contemporary crisis, not just of student voice, but the wider field of compulsory schooling and the social and political contexts that shape it. I then apply my typology - of impersonal organisation, affective community, high performance learning organisation and person centred learning community - firstly to schooling itself, next to commensurate approaches to leadership, and lastly, to ways in which leadership might encourage and extend student voice within the school.

Of these four organisational orientations it is the last two, the high performance learning organisation and the person centred learning community, that I look at more closely. The former, replete with tough targets, a usurious discourse of ‘user’ engagement, and an ‘emotionally intelligent’ articulation of economic purposes in a dissembling language of social justice and human fulfilment has swept aside alterative models with hegemonic confidence. Yet, despite its dominant status and high profile advocacy, it is essentially totalitarian, in form of not intention, and thus needs to be
exposed and opposed. Here student voice tends towards an exploitative use of young people largely for purposes of perpetual performance and occasional ostentation. In contrast, the latter, more compelling alternative offers, not only approaches to schooling that reclaim a commitment to education as an holistic undertaking, but also an alternative account of wider human flourishing in a democratic society. Here student voice is essentially dialogic and, in its most exploratory mode, challenging of boundaries and demarcations, preferring instead the intimations of a radical collegiality.

Towards a new intellectual framework

A number of studies have devoted some attention to wider intellectual frameworks, e.g. neo-liberalism, critical theory and post-structuralism and the work of social theorists such as Bernstein and Bourdieu to illuminate aspects of contemporary student voice work that often go unremarked and unnoticed. However, whilst their insights have often been helpful and an important corrective to the naiveté of much current advocacy, they do not identify what I take to be the most significant threat, not only to potentially promising developments within education such as student voice, but also to wider struggles for a more fully democratic way of life. In order to understand this threat and to counter it with a sufficiently robust alternative we need to retrace our intellectual steps, not just to different accounts of voice, but to fundamental articulations of the self, of our being and becoming as persons. Here the practical necessity of philosophy comes into its own.

For John Macmurray, on whose work my own model of personal and organisational flourishing rests, this is best understood in three ways. Firstly, we need to recognise that human beings are deeply situated, communal beings whose personhood is steeped in mutuality. For Macmurray our personhood is constituted by, and does not merely imply, personal relationships between persons. Personality is mutual in its very being. The self is one term in the relation between two selves. It cannot be prior to that relation and, equally, of course, the relation cannot be prior to it. ‘I’ exists only as a member of the ‘You and I’. The self only exists in the communion of selves.’ (Macmurray 1933:137)

Secondly, he argued that there are two fundamentally different kinds of relation we have as persons. Thirdly, and most originally and most importantly, he suggested we need to develop a more satisfactory understanding of the proper relation between the two.

Two different modes of encounter

The two different modes of encounter with other persons that define our being in the world are what Macmurray calls ‘functional’ relations and ‘personal’ relations. ‘Functional’ or instrumental relations are typical of those encounters that help us to get things done in order to achieve our purposes: indeed, functional relations are defined by those purposes. By contrast, ‘personal’ relations exist in order to help us be and become ourselves in and through our relations with others and part of that becoming involves our mutual preparedness to be open and honest with each other about all aspects of our being. In these kinds of relationships, as, for example, in
friendship, we do, of course do things together. However, these joint activities or encounters do not define the relationship; they are expressive of it.

For Macmurray, the interdependence of the functional and the personal is both inevitable and desirable. The functional provides the concrete, instrumental means by which the personal expresses itself. Just as the personal needs the functional to realise itself in action, so too the functional needs some element of the personal to achieve its purposes. The key point here lies in Macmurray’s further suggestions, not just of the interdependence of the functional and the personal, but the particular nature of that interdependence. For him, whilst the personal is through the functional – concern, care, delight become real in action through practical expression - crucially the functional is for the sake of the personal.

In my own work I have begun to augment and extend Macmurray’s line of thinking and argue that not only is the functional for the sake of the personal, and the personal achieved through the functional, but the influence of the personal on the functional is transformative of it: the functional should be expressive of the personal. Ends and means must be inextricably linked; the means should themselves be transformed by the ends by which they are inspired and towards which they are aiming. The functional ways in which we work together in schools to achieve personal, communal and educational ends should be transformed by the moral and interpersonal character of what we are trying to do.

The crisis we currently face has its roots in the fact that our dominant practical and intellectual frameworks reverse the very relation I am advocating. In what I term the ‘high performance’ model of schooling the personal is used for the sake of the functional: students are included or excluded, valued or not, primarily on the basis of whether they contribute to organisational performance of the school. The pressure they and their teachers are put under to raise standards and improve performance marginalises the very educational aspirations that gives schooling its justification and its purpose. Student complaints that schools do not care about them as persons, but only about them as bearers of results and measurable outcomes are now ubiquitous. The same is true of teachers. The same is also true of many of the ‘new wave’ student voice developments which the Special Issue of this journal seeks to understand and interrogate.

The Interpersonal Orientation of Organisations

My four-fold typology of the Interpersonal Orientation of Organisations (see Figure 1 below) articulates ‘impersonal’, ‘affective’, ‘high performance’ and ‘person-centred’ modes of being and working together on the basis differently orientations towards the functional / personal distinctions sketched earlier. I briefly sketch something of the basic characteristics of the first two types - the impersonal organisation and the affective community - before exploring in more detail how each of the other two - the high performance learning organisation and the person centred learning community - address issues of leadership and student voice.
**The Impersonal Organisation**

The first two orientations, namely, the ‘impersonal’ and the ‘affective’, take diametrically opposite stances on the relation between the functional and the personal. In the impersonal orientation, *the functional marginalises the personal* which it sees as largely irrelevant and counter-productive of the core purpose of the school. It results in a predominantly mechanistic organisation that is primarily concerned with efficiency. It would typically be dominated by role relations and the prominence given to procedures.

The interface between the senior leadership of the school and leadership by young people themselves within the student body tends to be formal and traditional. Principals / headteachers encourage staff to pay attention to student views in properly designated arenas and encourage the replication of hierarchy and a culture of excellence through prefects, head boys and head girls, monitors, those gifted at sports and the arts, and award winners of various kinds who stand as exemplars for other young people in the school.

**The Affective Community**

In contrast to the impersonal orientation, the affective standpoint *valorises the personal at the expense of the functional*. It is animated by an inclusive, restorative impulse rather than by the sifting, sorting and segregating predilections of efficiency.
Its intense concern with the individual needs of young people results in little time or patience for the functional or organisational arrangements needed to translate the warmth and deeply held emotional commitments into practical realities that help young people learn in a variety of ways.

Informal engagement in the organic processes of day-to-day living and working together are seen as more authentic and more satisfying than the perceived dishonesty and pretence of many schools that trumpet their student engagement credentials through the roll call of councils and consultative groups. In line with these dispositions the interface between the senior leadership of the school and leadership by young people themselves within the student body tends to be opportunistic and emergent. Young people are encouraged to take initiative of various kinds both within the formal curriculum and in connection with trips, camps, engagement with the community and other activities driven by student enthusiasm and interest.

Naming The New Totalitarianism

The strengths of both the impersonal organisation and the affective community orientations are also the source of their weaknesses. They are essentially exclusive in their approaches: whilst properly identifying one of the key elements of human relation as crucially important they marginalise or ignore the other. By contrast, the two inclusive orientations - the high-performance learning organisation and the person-centred learning community - acknowledge the necessity and importance of both, but have diametrically opposed views on the appropriate relation between the two. Both share a commitment to young people’s achievement, but take very different stances towards how that achievement is conceived and how it is best realised within the context of a school.

At first glance these two modes seem very similar and it is that apparent similarity, or at least the sometimes extreme difficulty in telling the two apart that provides grounds for my earlier claim that the typology I am advocating names and responds to a crisis of some importance. In essence we are talking about one mode which says ‘Have a nice day’ as part of a human relations mantra and another mode which is genuinely welcoming and engaging of us; one mode which uses extra time for tutorials to raise test scores and another that places personal encounter through dialogue at the very heart of its daily educational processes and intentions; one in which the sanctioning of creativity and personalisation is primarily the servant of the familiar narrow standards agenda and another in which creativity and the engagement with young people as persons is the harbinger of a much richer, more demanding fulfilment of education for and in a democratic society. They are worlds apart; their felt realities are utterly at odds with each other. And yet, it is not always clear which frame is dominant, whose purposes are being served, whether we are the victims of those whose interests are quite other than those we would applaud, or whether we are part of something which is likely to turn out to be fulfilling and worthy of our support. In sum, it is not clear whether a more sophisticated engagement with student voice is a seductive re-articulation of institutional insinuation or a genuinely different orientation to what we do and how we might do it.
The High Performance Learning Organisation

Much of the literature on performativity emphasises the extent to which it entails a denial of the personal, how through the ‘emptying out’ of social relationships which are left ‘flat’ and ‘deficient in affect’ (Lash & Urry 1994: 15 in Ball 2003: 224) any sense of caring for each other or for the young people with whom we work is marginalised or eradicated altogether: as Stephen Ball insists, ‘Performance has no room for caring’ (Ibid) and is now an anachronistic aspiration quite out of kilter with contemporary times. Much of this rings true to me. Certainly, the activities and worth of the school as a high performance learning organisation are dominated by outcomes, by measured attainment. Its form of unity is collective, rather than personal or communal. The significance of both students and teachers is derivative and rests primarily in their contribution, usually via high stakes testing, to the public performance of the organisation.

There is, however, something important missing from this indicative account of performativity. Part of the power of contemporary performativity rests on its acceptance, not of a hollowed out ontology awaiting the fabrications of performance, but of its managerial reconstruction through the simulacra of care. It is in the capacity of high performance learning organisations to ensure compliance through a sophisticated psychology of emotional assent that their totalitarian propensities and proclivities lie. The high performing school is an organisation in which the personal is used for the sake of the functional: staff are valued; the community is valued, but selectively according to their power and influence and primarily for instrumental purposes within the context of the market-place.

Leadership and the technologies of the self

With regard to leadership, the essentially manipulative mode of the high performance approach is one with which we are now very familiar. In apparent contrast to the deliberate distance of the impersonal organisation there are typically more developed, apparently responsive relationships with staff. However, the differences are often much more superficial than they at first appear. Both approaches seek to control staff: it is just that in one case relationships are seen to interfere with the capacity to manage, whereas in the other the intention is to manage staff through relationships, or, as one cultural theorist put it recently, ‘a move from having relationships towards doing relationships and towards relationship management.’ (Wittel 2001: 72)

Student voice and the imperatives of performance

Within a high performance learning organisation the main rationale for student voice lies in the clear grasp of the kinds of insights young people can offer teachers and other staff about what makes for effective teaching and learning, particularly in terms of high status measurable outcomes. There are thus multiple managed opportunities for teachers to listen to young people’s views, primarily on matters that coincide with current preoccupations of staff on whom there is substantial public pressure to perform. The high performance learning organisation tends to be much more sophisticated than either its impersonal organisation or affective community
counterparts in engaging at both formal and informal levels with young people. Whilst it will almost certainly have the usual range of formal opportunities for student consultation to a pre-eminent and highly visible degree it will also demonstrate the full panoply of new wave student voice activity such as students as lead learners, student ambassadors, student school improvement teams, and formal student leadership programmes, as well as initiatives like students as researchers and evaluators, students as governors / on school boards, student observers of teaching, students as academic and personal buddies.

The new requirements of leadership: on the necessity of student voice

In line with the wide-ranging forms of engagement with student voice outlined above the interface between the senior leadership of the school and leadership by young people themselves demonstrates a similarly eclectic mix, though, as with its approach to consultation within the school, the underlying driver and ultimate filter of what is and is not possible is guided by the school’s unremitting focus on outstanding performance in a high stakes public arena. It is this last point about the underlying rationale for these developments that defines senior leadership appropriate to student voice in this context.

Most high performance learning organisation schools exhibit the same range of traditional forms of hierarchical student leadership as their impersonal organisation school counterparts. However, these are often supplemented by more imaginative and more inclusive approaches mentioned above. Hierarchy is masked by the multiplicity of different forms of engagement and positive relationships with students expected, not merely welcomed as a pleasant accompaniment to joint endeavour. There is an unwavering corporate requirement on all teachers that student views are systematically sought on matters to do with the curriculum and formal learning. Student voice is not an option for either teachers or students: its managerial desirability slides smilingly into compulsion and with its insistence the dangers both of compliance and control begin to emerge (See Rudduck & Fielding 2006).

Alongside this largely benign account of student voice within a high performance orientation it is important to juxtapose an alternative reading that reflects the values and standpoints from which this paper is written. It is clear to me that student voice operating within the high performance mode is largely an instrumental undertaking orientated towards increased measurable organisational performance. In its most extreme form it is about the use of student voice for particular kinds of adult purposes. It is often technologically and emotionally sophisticated, seemingly interested in young peoples’ points of view, and attentive to suggestions that may enhance the school’s effectiveness and reputation. It is, however, ultimately totalitarian and often dissembling in its dispositions and its operation: here student voice only has significance and is only legitimate insofar as it enhances organisational ends. However enticing their approaches such schools, and indeed those many others which aspire to high-performance status, are increasingly encountering voices of young people who see, understand and reject what is going on; who feel used and abused by institutional smiles prompted primarily by the pull of performance; who refuse the Macdonaldisation of human relationships and the interpersonal and spiritual obesity.
that follows in its wake. It is to the orientation that provides a sound basis for that refusal, by adults as well as young people, that I now turn.

The Person Centred Learning Community

The contrast between the contrived discourse and often manipulative practice of the high performance learning organisation and the genuine engagement and transparency of person centred approaches are reflected in philosophical anthropologies that could not be more stark in their antagonism. As we have just seen, in the high performance learning organisation the personal is used for the sake of the functional. In direct contrast, the dynamic of the person centred learning community insists that the functional is for the sake of and ultimately expressive of the personal.

In its more fully developed, expressive mode the person centred learning community is one in which the functional is expressive of the personal. The organisational architecture is informed by interpersonal intentions. Not only are schools small or subdivided into human scale units (e.g. schools-within-schools), the geography of smallness becomes an enabler of more significant continuities and more engaging relationships. Teaching subjects and getting results are only justifiable insofar as they help young people to become better persons. Motivation is ipsative and emulative, eschewing the competitive approach typical of high performance schooling. Outcomes are widely and imaginatively conceived and its success is as satisfying morally and interpersonally as it is instrumentally. Its form of unity is communal and person-centred, rather than collective and outcomes driven.

Leadership and the development of good persons

What are we to say about leadership in a person centred learning community? Perhaps one of the first things to point out is that it is sometimes very hard to discern the difference between the personalised rhetoric of the high-performing learning organisation and the genuinely intended realities of the person centred learning community.

Among the many features of a person centred approach to leadership there are four that seem to me particularly pertinent in this context. The first has to do with the centrality of relationships, not only between staff and teachers, but also amongst staff themselves. The second has to do with the integrity of means and ends and the third with an inclusive imperative that challenges role boundaries and invites engagement. Finally, the fourth has to do with the making of meaning together, with the necessity of articulating a personal and a public narrative that helps us to understand and celebrate what it is we are trying to achieve, how we have done what we have done, and what is significant and worthwhile in this joint endeavour.

A commitment to certain kinds of enabling relationships are the sine qua non of person centred education. Amongst staff these are fostered both by the eradication or diminution of hierarchies and by the active support of practices like action learning and critical friendship that are deeply dialogic in their modes of engagement. Between students and staff they are fostered by the centrality of care in curriculum and
pedagogic arrangements and by the institutional architecture of community through developments like schools-within-schools or more integrated, student-led approaches to learning (4).

Insisting on the integrity of means and ends is more elusive in its exemplification, but no less important in its necessity. It has largely to do with our scrutiny, again often through dialogue with those most centrally affected, of ways in which the practices we advocate have hallmarks of the values and aspirations they are intended to realise. It is, if you like, about the practical insistence, both in daily work and future planning, of an essentially educational interrogative voice confronting the managerial inclinations of contemporary schooling.

One of the weaknesses of approaches which place substantial emphasis on the importance of the interpersonal dynamics of education - e.g. care, relationships, respect, community - is that what may be intended as fulfillment sometimes turns out to be, at best, a comfortable accommodation to the status quo, or, at worst, the demeaning suffocation of an overwhelming condescension. It is for reasons such as these that a person centred learning community has to attend with all the imaginative energy and resolve it can muster, not only to include the voices of all the young people it serves, but to the silences, inertia and fear that speak of the alienation and indifference of those who choose to remain silent.

In urging those in leadership positions to take seriously the making of meaning together I am, in effect, supporting the development of dialogic schools. I am taking seriously Richard Sennett’s fear that ‘short-term capitalism threatens to corrode ... character, particularly those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnishes each with a sense of sustainable self’ (Sennett 1998: 27). I am taking seriously his over-riding question ‘How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments?’ (Ibid: 26). One interesting set of responses to questions such as these can be found in the work of Alexander Sidorkin (Sidorkin 1999) who strongly advocates three devices for enhancing the development of dialogue. These are, firstly, ‘polyphony’ in which many voices are encouraged, often through teachers and students taking part in multiple activities, playing various roles, meeting in different situations. The second device is ‘civility’ which provides arrangements for those many voices to listen to each other as part of an ongoing ‘public conversation’, both formal and informal, about matters that touch on the moral basis of the school’s aspirations. Lastly, he suggests ‘carnival’ in which the norms of daily engagement are fleetingly turned upside down and the restrictions of role and custom lifted to enable a less encumbered human encounter.

Student voice and the possibility of a ‘radical collegiality’

In contrast to high performance approaches, student voice operating in person centred mode is explicitly and engagingly mutual in its orientation towards widely conceived educational ends that will often include measurable results, but are not constituted or constrained by them. It is about students and teachers working and learning together in partnership, rather than one party using the other for often covert ends. Within a person centred learning community issues of power and hierarchy are at once more
transparent and less secure than in other organisational orientations and the place of values explicit and central rather than peripheral or opaque. Certainly the interpersonal and institutional bad faith that hangs so heavily on the coattails of high performance modes of engagement has no place here. Person centred student voice work tends to be student driven, staff supported and often a genuinely joint endeavour. Whilst not eradicating either hierarchy or power the centrality of negotiation, the foregrounding of values and the willingness to work through their consequences in an iterative way, the explicitly exploratory nature of what is undertaken, and the tolerance of ambiguity and unpredictability do a great deal to address both in a recursive, on-going way.

Relationships between students and staff characteristic of person centred learning communities are based on mutual trust, care, autonomy and respect and have a double significance. Firstly, they transform the mechanics of consultation and the interstices of power through which young voices are heard, dialogue enacted and action taken. Formal and informal arrangements become expressive of the spirit of enquiry and committed engagement, not merely minimal gestures of thin entitlement and little consequence. Secondly, they succinctly articulate and underscore key aspirations of a democratic way of life.

One of the most profound and compelling explorations of many of these desiderata is Richard Sennett’s recent work on respect (Sennett 2003). For Sennett, respect requires acknowledgement of the autonomy of others, of their inevitable unknowability as well as their apprehended distinctiveness, through the activity and enactment of mutual engagement. In valorising the autonomy of the other, in this case students, we come not only to know them better in all their variety and vitality, we also come to appreciate what we do not understand and might never know. This process is also one in which we encounter ourselves: ‘in sensing how you differ from me, I know more about who I am as a distinct person.’ (Sennett 2003:121). Thus, for example, when student researchers present their work to staff or young people articulate their distinctive understandings of the world it is often the otherness of their standpoint that helps teachers not just to learn about the issues they are raising and the students they thought they knew by clearly did not, but also to learn about themselves as teachers and as persons. It is the difference and the connectedness that is so compelling: ‘autonomy supposes at once closeness and strangeness’ (Ibid:177).

Interestingly, at one point this leads Sennett to offer an exemplification of his argument by explicit reference to students in school. Just as our society grants a relative autonomy to doctors and teachers he suggests ‘the same autonomy ought to be granted the pupil or the patient because they know things about learning or being sick which the person teaching or treating them might not fathom.’ (Ibid:122). Not only do we have here one of the central arguments for student voice, we have it in a form which requires the essential continuities and significant engagement of a person-centred framework, not the passing calculus of snapshots surveys. Autonomy, and the ‘opaque equality’ of what eludes our understanding and thus requires our mutual respect, is not something that can be ticked off a checklist. It requires the ‘rhythm of identification and differentiation … that has constantly to be renewed’ (Ibid:121 – 122). These insistent continuities are indicative of a form of student voice that is attentive in its engagement and serious in its contribution to the enhancement of respect as a realisable ideal. It is not only an act of engagement that ‘requires
expressive work. … (one that) must be enacted, performed.’ (Ibid:59); it is an act of inevitable mutuality: ‘reciprocity is the foundation of mutual respect’ (Ibid:219).

Four key issues for emancipatory leadership

It is the necessity of the on-going nature of this enactment and the insistent and permanent reciprocity of its realisation that set apart student voice within a person-centred orientation from its high performance counterpart and moves it towards the emancipatory framework of ‘radical collegiality’ (Fielding 1999). There are four key issues for leadership here: firstly, to do with supporting an inclusive, values-driven approach; secondly, to do with commitment over significant time-frames; thirdly, to do with a willingness to co-construct new identities that transcend traditional demarcations; and, fourthly, to do with the intended emergence of new public spaces that are explicitly dialogic in form and ethos.

Voices and values

What is clear from those who have significant experience of person-centred approaches to student voice is that it only stands a chance of moving from a largely technicist engagement to more emancipatory modes if the issue of values, including those expressive of an explicitly multi-vocal, collective approach to inclusion, frame the undertaking and infuse its way of working. Thus, for students and teachers involved in more radical forms of students-as-researchers work, engaging with values seemed to lead more insistently back to purposes and this kind of recursive moral and political engagement enabled them to gain the confidence and the collective courage to challenge where appropriate and to be more adventurous in their ways of working together. This needs the backing of senior leadership in a whole range of ways, including interpersonal support for those involved, overt cultural legitimation of the undertaking (see Fielding & Bragg 2003 pp 47-53), a willingness to articulate the aspirations of student voice work in terms of wider human purposes, and the necessity of reaffirming the specifically educational aspirations of schooling.

Permanent provisionality

One of the starkest differences between student voice in high-performance orientations and those within person-centred schools concerns the contrasting timeframes and pressures that condition its work. Essentially episodic in their rhythm and rationale, market-driven approaches valorise contract, clarity and closure (Sennett 2003: 221) over the more subtle and enduring person-centred orientations of collegiality, ambiguity and openness. Whilst high performance discourse articulates and enacts the truculent, often spurious, precision of targets and delivery (Fielding 2001), commitment to person-centred student voice requires a more patient, no less purposeful, no less grounded narrative at the heart of which lie dialogue, collective reflection and the restless necessity of a permanent provisionality. The challenge for school leadership is to further develop occasions and opportunities in which both the daily rhythms of work and the more special rituals and emblematic circumstances of
communal encounter include those kinds of dialogic spaces for students and their peers, for staff and students working together, and for the wider school community.

**New identities**

One of the most exciting prospects of ‘new wave’ student voice of the last fifteen years is the possibility that we may have within it occasional glimpses of prefigurative emancipatory practices and that we might learn, both from those examples and from radical traditions of state education in our own countries (shamefully neglected in England, but currently being reclaimed – see the Special Issue of *Forum* Vol 47 No 2 and Fielding 2005) how to create person-centred learning communities within systems of schooling that are deeply unsympathetic to either their aspirations or their hard-won realities. The evidence is spasmodic, small-scale, and inevitably contested, even amongst advocates. Nonetheless, it is worth underscoring aspects of these alternative realities that give us courage and hope in dark times. The key point here is that more radical forms of student voice work are beginning to co-construct new understandings of what it is to be a student, what it is to be a teacher, in ways which blur boundaries and invite a different set of relationships and modes of working that model the dispositions and working practices of education in and for democracy.

Two aspects of these working practices are particularly pertinent here. The first of these is the development of a significant reciprocity animated and enabled primarily through a communal way of working. I am not just talking about the now much more widely held belief that students have some significant insights into the nature of learning that can and should be utilized by all concerned. What I am suggesting goes beyond the reciprocity of technique and topic. It concerns the more profound, more wide-ranging possibilities of teachers learning with and from young people in more holistic ways through processes of co-constructed, collaborative work. The second aspect of emerging new identities has to do with a growing awareness on the part of young people that, on occasions and in particular contexts and circumstances, students might also teach their teachers. Whilst there are dangers of an even more seductive and successful form of incorporation here (Bragg 2003), my own view is that we will not begin to make significant progress in moving student voice work onto a radical plane unless and until students accept their own capacity to be teachers too. Furthermore, moves towards a ‘radical collegiality’, not just a radical collaboration, rest on the necessity of that joint endeavour being informed by the ethics and ideals of teaching and education, not just the mutual exchange of information and skills.

**New public spaces**

The fourth site for leadership development work that holds out some promise, despite being significantly under-developed at the present time, has to do with the essentially ‘public’ dimension of person centred student voice (5). Currently, attempts by those doing radical work to engage with either the student or staff body as a whole, or significant elements of it, tend to be brief, largely one-way, and often concerned more with conveying information than enacting or initiating of dialogue. In one sense this is not surprising since the public arenas that exist in schools tend to be segregated into those for students, those for staff, and those designed for and by staff to talk at rather
than with young people. What the dynamic of new wave student voice now requires is the emergence of significant occasions when young people lead dialogue with their peers and with staff, where students and staff involved in radical work encourage the school, or sections of it, to begin to engage as equals, as co-enquirers in and co-contributors to understanding how as a community it helps its members to live good lives together.

Endpiece

We live in difficult times. It becomes increasingly hard to discern the nature of the challenges that face us and yet the necessity of us doing so becomes more rather than less important. Whilst we may disagree about, for example, the proper relation between social justice and the felt realities of joyful and creative human encounter, many of us will nonetheless agree on the absolute necessity of both. We need, with the narrator of William Morris’s *Dream of John Ball*, to reflect on

> How men (sic) fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name. (Morris 1968 [1886/87]:53)

The schools for which I am arguing are places that involve young people in that reflection and dialogue, places where our humanity emerges from and guides our learning together.

Notes

1 The sources I cite here are inevitably a very small, partial selection from the last few years. I have found the overview by Ann Vibert & Carolyn Shields (Vibert & Shields 2003) very helpful and have offered my own version of something in similar vein in Fielding (2004)(b). Those writing persuasively from a critical theory perspective include John Smyth (Smyth 2004) and Brenda McMahon and John Portelli (McMahon & Portelli 2004). The most persuasive post-structuralist writing in the UK comes from Sara Bragg (Bragg 2003). Madeleine Arnot and Diane Reay draw convincingly on Bernstein (Arnot & Reay 2006) and Pat Thomson and Roger Holdsworth have used Bourdieu’s work persuasively in this field (Thomson & Holdsworth 2003).

2 What follows is a highly compressed account of Macmurray’s thinking on these matters. For a fuller account relevant to this typology see Fielding (2004)(a).

3 I realise that the term ‘person-centred’ carries with it echoes of Carl Rogers’ work. Whilst there is much about Rogers’ writing I warm to it is too prone to individualistic interpretation for my liking: I wish there were another term I could use. ‘Human centred’ has been suggested. The Macmurray scholar Colin Kirkwood who is critical of Rogers for just these reasons prefers the strictly Macmurrayan ‘persons-in-relation’.
The work of Ian Cunningham is very significant here. See Cunningham (2005) for a brief account of groundbreaking contemporary work on (action) learning groups with school students.

Two very fine researchers with an interest in public space and student voice are Helen Gunter (Gunter 2005) and Jane McGregor (McGregor 2003, 2004)

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References


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