Practices, tensions and ambiguities in the voices of learners: a case study from the London Borough of Havering

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Introduction
This paper focuses on an on-going case study in a secondary school in the London borough of Havering and the collaboration of the school with a local university. The original focus of the case study was to look at students as informants / respondents and their journey to becoming student researchers within the context of student voice. The paper examines data collected from follow-up interviews with nominated pupil-representatives from this student voice project as well as those pupils not directly involved. These interviews were carried out by representatives of the university who were involved with the initial project. The focus of these interviews has been to explore if these students felt that they had ‘joint responsibility’ (Huddlestone, 2007) in the developments taking place within their school.

Context
Student (or ‘pupil’) voice has been the subject of considerable academic debate over the last twenty years (e.g. Giroux, 1986; Ashworth, 1995) and since the British government’s Every Child Matters policy initiative has attracted renewed attention in England from policy makers, examination boards, government ministers and journalists. Driving forces for this renewed attention include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UK Healthy Schools Initiative, Building Schools for the Future (BSF) and increasingly School Self-Evaluation (SEF). It is recognised that student voice is an important factor in the educational process and, as such, it is essential to listen to the voices of students at every level of education (Ashworth, 1995). Many studies have explored the role of student voice in educational change and reform (e.g. Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2001), while others have stressed the importance of not only listening to voices, but engaging in dialogue (e.g. Lodge, 2005). Over the last few years, dialogue and consultation have been major themes emerging from the student voice agenda (for example, Arnot et al, 2003; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). We have moved from the notions of dialogue, ‘shared responsibility’ and consultation (Huddleston, 2007), to students becoming researchers in their own right (cf. Fielding and Bragg, 2003), which is, according to Thomson and Gunter (2006: 839), potentially a more ‘transformative / disruptive process’. One of the major issues which has emerged recently, then, is the issue of ‘power’ and the transformative potential of student voice (Fielding, 2004; Fielding and Rudduck, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2006).

Halsey et al (2008) argue that there are considerable benefits to some educational shake holders when the voices of young people are listened to including:

- Improvements in student services (e.g. changes in school dinners; improving toilet facilities etc)
- Improvements in decision making (e.g. giving learners more of a say in the financial decisions taken by schools)
- Greater democracy for learners (e.g. allowing pupils a say in which teachers are employed; how long lessons run for; influencing subjects offered)
- Fulfilling legal requirements within schools (e.g. in terms of ‘citizenship’ and Every Child Matters legislation)
- Enhancing children’s skills (e.g. allowing learners to run meetings with staff; including learners on interview panels)
- Empowering child self-esteem (e.g. increasing self-confidence and status when learners are consulted by their peers and teachers)
Added to these advantages is the fact that many teachers, heads and administrators gain access to the specialist (and largely untapped) knowledge that learners have about their schools. This leads Fielding (2001) to argue that many student voice projects act as a catalyst for change in schools including improvements in teaching, the curriculum and most importantly, student-teacher relationships. However, Fielding is also highly critical of some of the ways that Student Voice is articulated:

Are we witnessing the emergence of something genuinely new, exciting and emancipatory that builds on rich traditions of democratic renewal and transformation?...or are we presiding over the further entrenchment of existing assumptions and intentions using student or pupil voice as an additional mechanism of control [Fielding, 2001: page 100]

Three theoretical perspectives on Student Voice, highlighted by McMahon and Portelli (2004), throw light on the views expressed by the young people interviewed in this study:

1. Conservative – an unproblematised conception of Student Voice where engagement and consultation is seen as a means to improving learning.
2. Liberal – a more holistic view on the child that goes beyond the academic taking into consideration student-teacher relationships and the emotional well-being of children.
3. Critical/democratic – a view challenging the nature of, and status quo in, many schools in ways that the above two approaches ignore. Young people and adults are perceived as engaging together in ways that question the processes, purposes and procedures in schools and classrooms with empowerment for all as an ideal outcome.

It is our view that the students interviewed in this study display characteristics from all three perspectives in their critical evaluation of the Student Voice project in their school. However it is also our view that a marked difference exists in the voices of those included in the project and those who felt, for a variety of reasons that their voices were not listened to. It is by engaging with these silenced voices that we feel schools can move to a more critical, democratic and enlightened understanding of school processes, purposes and procedures.

The Case Study
The Student Voice project that this paper explores was launched in January 2007 at a secondary school in the London Borough of Havering. The aim, from the school’s point of view, was to provide a method of encouraging students to become actively involved in decisions about their own learning and empowering them with appropriate ways to do so. The school set out to:

- Ensure that all learners, irrespective of their class, gender, ethnicity, and ability, were involved in decisions about how, what and when they learn, with whom and the type of environment in which this occurs.
- Ensure that students were involved in school improvement strategies and the co-construction of policy making with teachers.

Each form group from the school elected three student voice representatives making a total of 92 Pupils. Each of the three students were chosen to represent the form on one of the following ‘voices’:

The “Blue Voice”: Focussing on teaching and learning.
Each “voice” had an executive group to represent them at meetings (pupil representatives in each form group and a member of teaching staff from the senior management team). The 92 students were voted onto the scheme by their peers with the intention that they represented the 840 diverse student population of the school. All 92 students received school and university based training designed to help them:

- Run a productive meeting
- Gain confidence in voicing an opinion
- Listen to one another’s point of view
- Have a rudimentary understanding of research skills
- Have a rudimentary understanding of research ethics

Following this training the students returned to school where they carried out research on their focus group ‘voice’. This culminated at the end of the year in the production of three charters the school was to use that reflected the concerns of the three ‘voices’. Maintaining enthusiasm and momentum for a major school initiative is a challenge. As Fielding recommends, ‘It is crucial for student perceptions and recommendations to be responded to, not merely treated as minor footnotes in an unaltered text’ (Fielding and Ruddock. 2002) The Senior Management team involved in instigating Student Voice in the school were very keen that each year there should be a clear progression and with tangible results.

The second year of the project involved reflection and dissemination of the work carried out. The success of the first year meant that some students were asked to talk at conferences and were invited to national award ceremonies. This second year was crucial in moving forward the project and enabling different students to become involved. The second round of voting took place in school and each form had three new representatives, one for each voice. A training day at the University of East London took place to enable the ‘new’ representatives to understand their role as researchers and to recognise some of the issues in relation to respect and ethical working on such a project. Afternoon workshops enabled each ‘voice’ to reflect on the success of the first year and to identify themes to be developed back at school. Some of the issues that came from these workshops were related to monitoring success. For example, to what extent would it be possible to measure engagement from exam results, attendance or improvement in behaviour in school? As part of this reflective and evaluative process, researchers from the University went into the school to carry out focused group interviews.

**Theoretical Framework**
This paper has been theoretically and methodologically framed by questions that relate student voice to values at a societal, institutional and individual level. The methodological dilemma has been to adopt an analytical framework that acknowledges some of the ‘macro’ large scale structural processes that can influence student voice initiatives while simultaneously addressing the ‘micro’ small-scale individual actions and meanings of the respondents that are so important to us as qualitative researchers. Layder (1993; 1994; 1998) recognises the existence of a
social reality, with social structures and currents which have an existence over and above the existence of individual actors. Yet he also recognises the significance of human agency in the formation of those structures. In so doing he praises interpretive approaches to sociological research with a focus on values allowing us to resolve this methodological dilemma. We draw on, amongst others, Thomson and Gunter (2005) who identify Student Voice as having three distinct levels or approaches. The first is one of consultation, where pupils are consulted on a matter and it may or may not have an impact or an outcome. The second, is when pupils are engaged in the school self evaluation process. Finally, the third level is for students to become researchers in their own right. The students are empowered to carry out research into their schooling and this research can lead to recommendations or actual change within the institution (Fielding and Bragg, 2003).

Methodology

It was anticipated that students directly involved in the study would feel positive about the experience but the interest for us, as researchers, was to discover if all students felt this way including those who had little or no input into the project. For this reason, it was essential that the study focussed on three groups of students:

Group A: Those that were involved in the student voice initiative at the school.
Group B: Those that were not involved in any way.
Group C: Those students who were not involved but had expressed interest in the project.

In order to research the opinions of the students, the research method adopted was focus group interviews with eight students in each group. The advantage of using this method was that it enabled dialogue between the researcher and those being interviewed, as well as generating sufficient rapport for the students to talk amongst themselves. This was of particular significance because of the varying ages of students involved in the project. Their responses were digitally recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed at a later date.

Data

We turn first to examine some of the interview extracts from those in Group A, i.e. those involved in Student Voice at the school.

Focus Group A – Those involved in the Student Voice initiative

There was a strong sense conveyed by those interviewed in this group that the project is democratic in nature. This was conveyed in a number of different ways:

Pupil I X (2007): Because all the forms have their representative voice, people who want to express their view know who to go to, so if they want to express something about their environment, they go ‘green’.

Pupil I Y(2007): The form vote, so, your form knows how responsible you are, how sensible, how good you are at leading so they vote you in.
When asked if they felt that Student Voice at the school was inclusive there was an almost meritocratic sense that some voices were heard more than others:

Pupil 2 A (2007) I think, we get, obviously, more of a say than people who don’t voice their opinion, but the way it’s structured, everyone will have their say, they can. Because in form times, we get questions to ask the form and they get taken to the meetings and get passed onto the executives. It works both ways, everyone like, everyone can have their say. Obviously, the minority will choose not to.

Pupil 2 B (2007): Not everyone, there will always be a minority that just don’t want to get involved or they’re too shy, or they just don’t want to do it because it’s not cool enough or something like that.

However it was also clear that while these students felt that there was potential for all voices to be ‘heard’ and that they represented the majority of the school they believed that the overall direction that Student Voice took was determined by the school:

Pupil 2 B (2007): We just got told, like “this is how it works” and like I think we elected representatives…did we go to like a meeting where we were told what it was going to be about?

Pupil 2 C (2007): Yeah, and then we went back to our forms and told them and then they’d understand what was going on in the school.

Interviewer: Were you given a say in what sort of areas you wanted to study [research]?

Pupil 1 C (2007): Told weren’t we?

Pupil 1 D(2007): Yeah – they decided on the three groups

Hart (1997) argues that there is often a hierarchical ladder of participation in many Student Voice initiatives where manipulation (adults use children’s voices to carry their own message), decoration (children have no involvement – they are just there to look good) and tokenism (a voice but with no opinions or choice in the subject) are seen as the bottom rungs. While it would be wrong to assert that these three rungs characterised the project as a whole, elements exist in the quotations above. However it is by turning to those not involved in the project where we get a clearer sense of just how far Hart’s framework sheds light on the complexities of this Student Voice initiative.

Focus Group B: Those not involved in the Student Voice Initiative

Fielding and Rudduck (2002) identify one key issue related to Student Voice as being whose voice can be heard and by whom. They argue that for change to take place, it is important to know who is talking and who is listening and indeed, if the listening is authentic. The following interview extracts come from those students not involved in
the student voice initiative. A common theme that emerged in the coding of these interview extracts was a sense of exclusion from the dialogue process:

Interviewer: Do you think the people that were chosen were more or less popular with teachers?

Pupil 1 Z (2008) Most people usually vote for their friends than who would be more appropriate for that position so it depends really – who is popular and for what reason.

The meritocratic nature of the project conveyed by those in focus Group A was challenged by these young people who were not involved:

Pupil 1 U (2008): Student Voice doesn’t talk to the other kids. If they want the best for the students and the teachers they need to go around and talk to the different kids in the playground. At the moment they are only speaking to one side of the kids which is probably their friends. I don’t think the Student Voice asks around – like the other class of kids – like the bad kids and the good kids. I’m not sure if they are afraid of them – or they don’t want to hear what they have to say.

Particularly noticeable with this focus group was the way many positioned themselves as ‘others’ as a strategy to strengthen their own emerging identities (Maguire, 2008):

Pupil 1 V (2008): I agree with him, cos the ‘good’ students don’t really like to interact with kids that are not really as good as them – so they need some one like them to represent them.

The process of displacing and ‘othering’ (Nias, 1989) pupils can build up group identity and solidarity at a time when the identities of these young people are susceptible and fragile to the scrutiny of others (e.g. parents, teachers and their peers). When asked why, if they were so critical of Student Voice, they did not participate in it many felt there was little point:

Interviewer: Is that because you don’t see the value of it?

Pupil 1 U (2008): Yeah (hesitant) or just because you just don’t think you are going to get voted.

Pupil 2 X (2008): Yeah, people like nominated themselves, and then the rest of the form decided who they wanted.

The consultative nature of the Student Voice project was also challenged by those not involved in it:

Pupil 1 X (2008): They did not bother to talk to the class they just went with their own ideas.

Interviewer: But you voted them on didn’t you?
Fielding and Rudduck (2002) point out that there are many silent voices, i.e. students who don’t feel able to comment without some sort of framework of security to protect them from school hierarchies be they from within the staffing of the school or the many types of pupil-subcultures. What is powerfully conveyed in these interviews is the role that agency plays by those students who deem the involvement in Student Voice as futile. However, many interviewees did recognise that the Senior Management Team had made a decision to run vertical tutor groups as a result of the positive impact of working across age boundaries on the Student Voice project. They were hopeful that this would improve the likelihood of “less model students” being selected to represent their forms.

Focus Group C: Those not involved in the Student Voice Initiative but would like to be.

In contrast to Group B most pupils in this group were more accepting of the dialogue process simultaneously acknowledging that there needed to be a ‘them and us’ hierarchy to make decisions and to get the project started:

Interviewer: Were you told about this in an assembly or did your form teacher tell you about it?


Interviewer: Do you think the people that were chosen were more or less popular with teachers?

Pupil 2 Q (2008): More because they were better students, worked harder and that… Volunteering to do extra things – they deserved to be on it [Student Voice].

Many felt that as a form “gets to pick” someone, the voting system is not unfair and is the best way to select a representative. Personal qualities tended to be the main focus when choosing suitable candidates:

Pupil 1 Q (2008): You need someone who gets respect from teachers and us and its better they can talk, can stand up and tell it as it is and not get phased.

Most agreed that student voice representatives tended to be more popular with the teachers and possibly better students who would work hard and would be prepared to do more for the school. There was broad agreement that everyone in the school, if asked, would state Student Voice as a school initiative, had improved the school and the environment. For this group it was the environment that had the most tangible impact i.e. there was visible evidence that student voice was making a difference:
Pupil 3 Y (2008): Like outside in the bins, and there’s more recycling bins as well.

Interviewer: You can’t just see this as a sort of school wish list and say we want this and we want that?

Pupil 4 Q (2008): No, it’s not like that. The Bursar is involved in everything and the Green Voice rep goes to a meeting with her and she talks about the budget and what can be spent and when.

Most students in this group felt that the environment had been significantly improved as a result of student voice lending support to Goodson (in Watson and Fullan 1992), who stated that ‘it was no good just to give a voice, there needs to be transformation or an interruption to the ordinary life of school. Quality Student Voice requires coherent institutional commitment and a new perspective on relationships.’ While consultation was acknowledged to have existed prior to the Student Voice initiative with the existence of a School Council this was criticised for producing a ‘wish list’ of unrealistic items to be purchased. This particular group acknowledge that the current student voice initiative was an improvement on previous attempts by the school to address democratic student participation. That said, some did question whether everyone had been able to state what they thought needed to be improved or whether it was just the ‘better kids’ who had their wishes met.

Discussion
Insights gained from examining interviews from young people in a secondary school reflecting the market-led approach to education adopted in England provides a context and setting for a fruitful exploration of some of the dynamics underpinning student voice. Student Voice is inevitably nuanced not only by politics, culture and practice but by a variety of educational values. Such values are:

like currents in the stream, words and acts distinguishable in a certain place and at a certain time perhaps with patterns that can be traced but not separable from a historical discourse embodied in culturally established ways of thinking, speaking and acting on educational issues [Phelan and McLaughlin, 1995: page 166].

Lodge (2008) notes that there has been a shift in the 19th and 20th century ‘children-should-be-seen-and-not-heard’ perceptions of childhood compared to more child-centred discourses that exist in many private and public spheres. That said, in many schools, expectations about children are still shaped by an ‘ideology of immaturity’ (Ruddock and Flutter, 2004) that characterised both centuries. This ideology is based upon an outdated view of childhood in which school exclusion of young people from the processes of dialogue and decision making fails to acknowledge young learners’ capacity for resourcefulness, ingenuity, enterprise and an ability to reflect on issues affecting their education. Tensions exist between this ideology and more marketized, consumer based ideologies in schools in which the student voice agenda should fit cosily. Although Schools have successfully moved from blackboard to whiteboard to smart-board they have been largely unsuccessful in recognising societal expectations that young people mature at an increasingly younger age. The danger of not recognising this mismatch in expectations has been picked up by Ruddock (2002):
Schools in their deep structures and patterns of relationship have changed less in the last fifteen years or so than young people have changed...we know that from an early age young people are capable of insightful and constructive analysis of social situations and if their insights are not harnessed in support of their own learning then they may use them strategically to avoid learning in school and conspire unwittingly in the process of their own underachievement [pp 123-124]

The question remains, how do we listen to every voice and improve the learning experience of every child? Despite the best intentions of the school in which this case study is based on, there are varying degrees of success in which ‘voice’ has been articulated. In some cases, opinions have been used to endorse policies the school had planned to put into place in the first case (e.g. the provision of a new electronic attendance system etc). There is a strong sense conveyed in these interviews between those that have been brought into the consultation process and those who feel excluded. The mechanisms for that exclusion process are complex, fluid and dynamic involving both structural features embedded within the project and varying degrees of agency expressed by the young people interviewed. The school’s clarity in vision regarding how Student Voice was to be introduced (e.g. the setting up of three ‘voices’; the processes by which students were chosen to be voted onto the executive etc) reflect to some degree these structural features as well as the competitive nature of the school leadership team. This latter point is significant in that the school has won a number of awards for various initiatives including the Student Voice project that this paper addresses.

Within the context of a marketised competitive educational environment, Fielding and Ruddock (2002) question whether the Student Voice movement is ‘a passing fashion or a foundation for a new order of experience’. As researchers we were concerned that this project could just be about an enthusiastic school culture ‘ticking the right boxes’. However most students interviewed did not feel their input was tokenistic and they did feel the listening was authentic. Some pupils felt more involved than others but most seem to recognise change has been brought on by the initiative and can see a future for the project. The senior management at the school are committed to the project and are certainly tokenistic in their approach to Student Voice. We have seen, for example, how the Bursar is engaged in most of the decisions made by the students. She has made it her role to consider every spending request from the students and to sit down with the representatives to discuss the possibilities of spending from the budget. These students have a good understanding of the financial implications of their wishes and as a result are taking their negotiating role very seriously.

What was perhaps surprising was the limitation on the degree to which these young people felt that Student Voice should permeate all areas of the school. Most students interviewed clearly identified ‘comfort zones’ (McLaughlin and Waterhouse, 2008) in which they felt that Student Voice had a role to play. For example there was on the one hand, enthusiasm expressed for taking more responsibility in the running of the school. Many are open to learning from their peers and would like to develop opportunities to learn from each other in lessons in a more structured and planned way. However many felt the curriculum planning should be exclusively left to the teachers as ‘they know best’ and they would not have the necessary skills or knowledge to plan the school curriculum. While students were happy to engage with issues around flexibility in the classroom e.g. having smaller teaching groups and opportunities to move up or down a set depending on grades and attitude, they did
not want to get involved in assessment believing this to be down to the responsibility and expertise of the teacher.

The question still remains, how can schools become more able to embrace the student voice and work towards a better future for all? The key seems, from these interviews, to be in the feeling of being valued – both by staff and fellow students. In order to combat a reluctance by many to break out of their comfort zone, schools should move forward to look at the work inspired by Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice, in particular Barton and Trussing's (2005) review of the language and discourse that different communities engage in, the power and conflict that is embedded within those communities and the broader social context in which the community is placed. In essence then, for Student Voice to be effective, the community of practice or social space (Gee, 2000) needs to be one of trust, where language used is non-threatening, and where people feel valued and comfortable to change, experiment and take risks.

Conclusion
This paper is significant for three reasons. It has provided an opportunity to examine some of the tensions and ambiguities that exist when students are asked to become independent researchers within a state secondary school. It has considered to what extent student voice represents joint responsibility in the developments taking place or just the minority voices within pupil and teacher ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998). Finally it has raised questions about societal values and the ‘contrived distance’ (Stephens, 2004) between adults and children in different cultural contexts. At a time when it has been acknowledged that British Children represent some of the unhappiest within the industrialised world, recognising the pervasiveness of the ideology of immaturity that exists in many schools in England can reduce hope in an increasingly complex world. Often couched in terms of inevitability, such an ideology can drain energy and commitment from both learners and teachers. This paper illustrates how young people, if listened to, have the potential to transform school processes, purposes and procedures. The voices of the learners in this study and their concerns give rise to complex hope in exceedingly complex times.

Bibliography


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