Listening to Learners – Partnerships in Action: 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 University of East London (UEL). 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. In this paper we examine data from interviews with six student researchers from the school who received research training from the University and then spent four days at a school in Finland. Their remit, from the school’s student voice body, was to carry out research at the Finnish school and report their findings to their school’s student voice body in England with a view to implementing change within that school through a variety of student voice initiatives. These interviews were carried out by researchers from the university, who were involved with the initial project. This paper is very much ‘work-in-progress’ and while the extracts that follow provide a rich source of discussion and debate they should, in no way, be interpreted as the final analysis. Rather, we hope that this paper represents an opportunity to further explore some issues that have emerged in this initial part of the project.

Context

Running in parallel to the research being carried out by these young people in the East End of London, the newly elected coalition government in England has been doing its own fact finding. Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education is, at the time of writing, pushing through a number of reforms at breakneck speed and endorsed, he claims, by research taken from other national education systems. In the ‘Advancing Opportunity’ agenda, for example, proposals have been put forward to ‘free up the system’ allowing new schools to be set up and built in a free market economy that draws some of its ideas from the Swedish system. With the introduction of any policy initiative, as researchers we feel that we should ask “what do students think?” One answer might be that they do not possess enough experience or know-how to be able to influence decisions made at such a high level. We would question this. Following five years of research and learning with pupils at the school that this paper concerns itself with, we believe that young people in the East End of London may well have some answers and opinions worthy of consideration and consultation by educational policy makers.

Fielding (2009) describes ‘student voice’ as ‘a portmanteau term’ and as ‘student voice’, ‘pupil voice’ and ‘learner voice’ are terms often used synonymously in the literature we have done likewise in this paper. The term ‘voice’ should be used cautiously. As Robinson and Taylor note, not only are “monolingual assumptions illusory” (Robinson & Taylor,2006: 6) but that ‘voice’ encompasses much more than the speech of the speaker. Voice then is used as ‘strategic shorthand’ by academics and practitioners who recognise its limitations (Robinson & Taylor, 2006: 6) and recognise that meaning is a composite notion. Three definitions, related to student voice, are significant when considering the views of the six student researchers that this paper addresses. Firstly, Rudd maintains that student voice is about: “Empowering learners by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs in order to develop educational experiences better suited to those individuals” (2007 :8). Secondly, Johnson et al (2001) suggest that: “Learner voice is about considering the perspectives and ideas of learners, respecting what everyone has to say, taking risks, sharing, listening, engaging and working together in partnership”. Finally, Fielding refers to student voice as the practice of: “Listening purposefully and respectfully to young people in the context of formal schooling” (2008:2). We will return to these definitions in the discussion section of this paper.
Student voice has been the subject of considerable academic debate over the last twenty years (e.g. Giroux, 1986; Ashworth, 1995) and since then 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). 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 major issue which has emerged in the literature 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 stakeholders 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).

In addition to these advantages, many teachers, heads, administrators and policy makers can 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 can 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, 2001:100]

Flutter and Ruddock build on Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation to demonstrate how the amount of consultation and decision making in a school can vary. The bottom rung of the
ladder is zero consultation. There is no element of pupil participation or pupil consultation within the school. The first rung is ‘listening to pupils’ and shows that pupils are used only as a data source: teachers respond to data but pupils are not involved in the discussion of findings, there may be no feedback to pupils, teachers only act on the data gathered. The second rung of the ladder represents pupils as active participants. Teachers initiate enquiry and interpret the data but pupils are taking some role in decision making; there is likely to be some feedback to pupils on the findings drawn from the data. The third rung represents pupils as researchers, they are involved in enquiry and have an active role in decision making; there will be feedback and discussion with pupils regarding findings drawn from the data. Finally the top of the ladder is reached when pupils are fully active participants, when pupils and teachers jointly initiate enquiry; and pupils play an active role in decision making together with teachers they plan action in light of the data gathered and review the impact of the intervention.

Background to the case study
The Student Voice project which this report 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 directly involved in the Student Voice initiative. Each of the three students were chosen to represent the form on one of the following ‘voices’ instigated by the school’s Senior Management Team:
The “Blue Voice”: Focussing on teaching and learning.
The “Red Voice”: Focussing on behaviour, independent learning and individual progress.
The “Green Voice”: Focussing on the environment of the school.

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’. 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 and regional 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. Further training took place at the University of East London 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. In the third year of the project a variety of initiatives at the school have taken place under the ‘Student Voice’ banner. In the words of these student researchers – the aim of their visit to Finland was to:

To take on board any beneficial ideas from the Finish School System that we could try to introduce here at [name of school]. Now from our research we feel that there are many short and long term ideas that range from simple to difficult, that can all be achieved and be successful here at [name of school]. We have placed the ideas in relevance to our Student Voices, so that each voice will be able to expand on each idea. The way of life in Finland is much different to ours but it works so why can it not work here! [Quotation taken from presentation by students to their school governors]

This paper reports on one particular outcome, namely, the training of six students from the ‘Global Voice’ body at the school, to become researchers and their experiences at a school in Finland.

**Theoretical Framework**

Our work has been theoretically and methodologically framed by questions related to student voice at a societal, cultural, 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 identities allowing us to resolve this methodological dilemma. In addition to the three student voice definitions mentioned at the start of this paper, 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**

In this small-scale exploratory study two research methods were deployed in the data gathering process. Questionnaires, comprised of forty-nine ranked statements were administered to students before and after the trip to assess how their views about both the
Finnish and English systems of education changed. This data is yet to be analysed and forms no part of the analysis for this paper. The second method of data collection that this paper concerns itself with took the form of guided/semi-structured interviews (Kvale 1996) carried out with paired students shortly after the trip to Finland took place. Initial open coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967) forced the authors to make analytic decisions about the data while selective/focused coding highlighted more frequently appearing initial codes to sort and conceptualise the data sets (Charmaz 2000). A number of codes emerged that included: culture; respect; teaching and learning; the curriculum; relationships with parents, family and teachers; community; exam systems; uniform; school day; and behaviour.

Data

All six participants expressed surprise at how different Finnish culture was, even five out of the six students felt that they had been ‘adequately’ prepared by the school and the university prior to their arrival in Finland. All acknowledged ‘fundamental differences’ permeating the school they visited with one participant stating that he ‘never considered that education could be different’. Most referred to ‘traditional’, ‘family’ and ‘church’ value systems and used this to partially justify the very different ethos they found in the Finnish school compared to theirs back in England. Three students felt that could be explained by the way in which England’s ‘multi-cultural’ society was in stark contrast to the mono-cultural experience they encountered at this Finish School. As one student expressed “all came from the same walk of life, the same well brought up parents, whereas here [England] we’re much more diverse”. A combination of ‘cultural’ and ‘institutional’ differences, accounted for an overwhelming sense of ‘mutual respect’ between pupils and teachers, said to exist by all six student researchers and explained by the following student:

*I think the key word is respect, referring back to the head boy/head girl or kind of student leadership idea, they are given responsibility in the idea that there isn’t such a strict regime of sanctions and rewards and such. They’re given the responsibility to actually account for their own behaviours. But not to the teachers as such, but to each other and themselves. And I think a lot of students there really respected that. That was one of the reasons why they think, ‘we actually won’t do that [behave badly] because we’ve been given the responsibility now not to’ in effect [Joe, 16 years old].*

‘Respect’ and ‘trust’ were often used interchangeably by participants with one student saying that ‘our school talks a lot about trust’ but whether they actually have it is another matter’. Most students believed that the mutual respect they witnessed in Finland created a very different learning environment from the ones they were used to in their school in England. One student explains:

*there was an informality in class so the teacher and pupil bonded I think because of the respect and freedom and the pupil would call the teacher by their first name, so I think its those little things between them – the teacher-pupil relationship. It made it much more easy a much more easy ambience in class [Joe, 16 years old].*

Almost all students contrasted the more egalitarian relationships between Finnish teachers and pupils with those of their British counterparts. For example all six students compared the contrived distance (e.g. the English use ‘sir’/’miss’, the wearing of uniforms etc) they
experience in their English school with the comparatively ‘relaxed’ ‘informal’ ‘friendly’ and ‘first named’ based relationships that they said Finnish teachers cultivated with their pupils:

It was quite informal. Although we knew they wasn’t in uniform and things, even the teachers would dress really casually. They didn’t look like the teacher was responsible, but like, was in charge, so it didn’t really have that feel. It felt like, really quite free. I was quite shocked to see that, but then the teachers all had respect, all the kids respected their teachers [Rhianna, 15 years old].

If these more ‘informal’ and ‘friendly’ relationships between teachers and pupils were of surprise to most, of equal surprise to all six students was the apparent lack of ‘behaviour problems’ as Michael explained:

The lessons, disruptions, everyone respects everyone else, no one disrupts, there’s minor chatting but nothing major, like some of the stuff that goes on over here in some schools and the teacher they never get angry, lessons didn’t get disrupted, the whole non-uniform business, the fact they walk around school with no shoes on. It all works [Michael, 16 years old].

Three students referred to how ‘homely’ Finnish classrooms felt with one student explaining that this was because:

with uniform when you’re coming into school you just wear it you think ‘okay I’m coming here, I don’t really have to take care of it’. In Finland, when I took my shoes off I thought right, because you feel so much more homely, you think ‘I’m gonna treat this like my house’

The issue of classroom management and behaviour was clearly something that the six student researchers were keen to explore. All six students acknowledged that cultural differences between the two countries meant that bad behaviour was ‘vary rare’ in the Finnish school and that to ‘be rude to somebody’ in Finland ‘isn’t really in their nature’. One pupil stated that Finnish pupils are ‘given the responsibility to actually account for their own behaviour’ while another said that ‘If bad behaviour does occur which is very rare – it’s ignored’. Two students identified the ‘ignoring’ of bad behaviour with a fundamental mistake that they felt is made by many teachers in England:

If bad behaviour does occur which is very rare – it’s ignored. Over here [England], we reward the student with the attention of saying ‘stop doing that’...I’ll take away a credit, whereas there if a child is chewing gum at the back of the class, they get ignored and they don’t do it again coz they don’t get anything. What can they gain? [Alicia, 16 years old]

In a separate interview Robert makes a similar point:

I think we do pay too much attention. Everything is picked up in England but over there they ignore it. Here they’re being bad for a reason because they want to be noticed. And then when they’re stuck in isolation, it doesn’t change them [Robert, 16 years old].
All participants spoke enthusiastically about the Finnish curriculum and school structure and how they provided a very different learning experience to being in the ‘pressurised’ school environment in England. Pupils in Finland appeared to be more ‘motivated’ and ‘excited’ about their subjects and that it ‘wasn’t dull – you were awake and ready to learn because of the environment around you’. There was surprise with most participants that the teaching technology (e.g. computers, smart-boards etc) at the school in Finland was less advanced than what they were used to at their own school. However, in the following interview extract Rhianna and Jack describe how advanced technology does not necessarily equate, in their eyes with ‘good teaching’. Here they talk about a music lesson they observed and an interview they carried out with the music teacher:

_"I remember she was quite surprised and asked ‘how many years of music training have you had?’ so I was, like, we have three in our lower school and she was like ‘three? – you had three? And you mean you don’t play an instrument? These lot have only been learning for a year and look at them. It made me feel a bit inferior to be honest, that they were so good at everything. With limited resources as well – they had sort of plastic keyboards [Rhianna, 15 years old]."

_In our school we have all the technology and all this funded by our school but you look at how many children actually want to use it and actually bother in lessons, where as you go there and they're using sheets of paper as piano keys and they're really into it [Jack, 15 years old]."

Four students contrasted this ‘happier’ and ‘exciting’ environment with what they saw as a more ‘pressurised’, ‘competitive’ and ‘exam-based’ culture in England. One student said that in Finland ‘each day was different’, another said that ‘you never knew what to expect’, while a third believed that ‘teachers could teach what they liked’. An ‘excellent IT lesson’ observed was comprised of ‘students gaming’ with one participant describing this as ‘real learning’ taking place. All six spoke excitedly about how there were ‘hardly any exams’ in Finnish Schools. One student in particular compared this with his English experience as a pupil expressing anger at the public SATS examinations that primary school children in England have to sit:

_The pressure from year 6, primary school, no actually year 2. And I really can’t understand the reason for having SATS, what is the point in having this pressure: its for the school to go ‘he we are – we’re a great school’ not for the actual child’s purpose. We did SATS like all other children, and not one them, the final results, actually contribute to our secondary school choice or anything [Jack, 15 years old]."

Although one student believed that ‘maybe the pressure is good for life, like when you have a job’ another, despite her loyalty to her own institution contrasted her experience at school with her perception of schooling in Finland:

_"I don’t think people enjoy school here [England], I don’t think people want to come to school they’re forced to come to school. I think its all to do with this relaxed happy atmosphere that have in Finland, they enjoy coming to school coz they haven’t got the rules, they haven’t got the regulation, they haven’t got exams, they haven’t got the pressure, they enjoy their time at school. Whereas here, we got pressure thing to adhere to, we got criteria to meet, I think sometimes we’re just seen as a set of statistic, which isn’t really a nice thing to be [Rhianna, 15 years old]"
In the following extract Alicia explains how she feels the Finnish curriculum accounts for why Finnish pupils seem to enjoy being in the classroom more than their English counterparts:

_The curriculum is much more flexible, so the teacher can teach things that they’re passionate about. Which although is a very strange idea, I think is a very good idea. Every teacher is passionate about their subject but are able to focus on that bit I think this can be very encouraging, if you have a really enthusiastic teacher then you become more of these enthusiastic student, so I think they learn a lot more from the teachers outside knowledge about the subjects that they enjoy, rather than being on a fixed curriculum, for these exams which are done by the government_ [Alicia, 16 years old].

Another factor that emerged in the interview data with all six students was the sense of ‘community’ and ‘closeness’ they felt existed within and beyond the school borders. It was widely felt that students at the school shared a ‘similar demeanour’, how everybody seemed to ‘trust each other’ and how students ‘feel more part of the community’. Another believed that ‘it seemed like a closer community. I still don’t think we’re anywhere near the closeness that they have in their community. We talk about the [name of English School] community, but its nowhere near’. Four students identified the fact that most schools in Finland do not have fences and this was contrasted by one student to her own school:

_Over the past few years, we’ve had a fence put up, its kind of, I dunno if we should call it a prison, I dunno if I would go that far, it is definitely separate, ‘you can’t come here, you can’t go there, I’m gonna lock the door at the weekend, whereas there is open.. it’s the trust, there a lot of trust_ [Rhianna, 15 years old]

While all six student researchers endorsed and enthused about their four days experience of the Finnish education system there was far less agreement over the ways in which Finnish school policies could be implemented in England. Most felt that seeing one Finnish school was ‘not enough’ and that ‘more time’ was needed there. Two participants believed that it would also have helped to have ‘experienced another school’ in England to add authority to their inquiry. All were ‘surprised’ and ‘amazed’ at how much, in addition to the interviews they carried out they had learnt about schooling in Finland and how much as ‘researchers’ they had understood from ‘non verbal communication’, ‘just watching’ and ‘body language’. Almost all agreed that the system was better with one student saying ‘why cant we have something like that over here’ and another stating that in England ‘the school system is monotonous whereas over there every day is different, over there every day is a new surprise’. It was much harder, however, for participants to perceive how a similar environment could be created in England despite a clear desire for this to happen. One student felt ‘we can’t really incorporate it over here because were just so much more stricter’ while another questioned ‘how can we make it work here in a way that fits our own current system but also is reflective of their system’. We finish this data section with a quote from Joe, whose passion for the Student Voice initiative at his school and his experience in Finland was infectious:

_I think if the government tried hard enough, if they got their act together and produced a report that absolutely pushed this system, then perhaps it could work if you built it up from primary school to secondary, perhaps it could work, but it would also mean a different attitude from the parenting community, so in that respect_
perhaps it couldn’t, because I suppose it’s the way our parents have been brought up that influences children growing up [Joe, 16 years old].

Joe poses a particularly daunting dilemma for those who desire fundamental change to be brought about in English education systems, particularly change associated with policy migration.

**Discussion**

Insights gained from examining interviews from young researchers from 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. But it also provides fodder for an invaluable and timely discussion about the usefulness of importing, unproblematically, policy initiatives from other countries. What is particularly impressive with the data in this study is that, despite their age and limited time that these young researchers had in Finland, they have shown a remarkable cultural and contextual sensitivity to their research while simultaneously offering food for thought as to how schooling in England could be done differently. As Hammersley (2002) argues, one of the fundamental challenges for educational research is making the journey from research to policy and practice. For too long the perspective of learners has been ignored in educational research: “….rarely are their voices taken seriously into account in policies devised to improve teaching, learning and achievement” (Wood, 2003:365-6), despite the fact that learners, as Pollard, Triggs, Broadfoot et al (2000) have noted, are expert commentators.

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 in England, 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 in England 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* (Rudduck, 2002:123-124)

Alexander (2005) notes that “the language of education contains few universals and educational conversation across cultures is laced with pitfalls for the unwary” (Alexander, 2005: page 5). We were, however, surprised by the apparent ease in which these student researchers honed in on substantial differences between the two education systems. For
example all recognised the constraints that their teachers in England have in relation to a more prescriptive curriculum and its effects on the quality of teaching and learning. This was noted in sharp contrast to the scope Finnish teachers have to engage their students through greater freedom within the curriculum to choose what to teach. Strikingly apparent from these interviews is the perception by these student researchers of fundamentally different sets of relationships between teachers and pupils that are cultivated in Finnish schools. While some might attribute this to a different type of culture, one that is less populated, more rural, more mono-cultural and so on, a lot more, in the eyes of these student researchers is to do with institutional arrangements and relationships forged in schools. In other words they believe that things can ‘be done differently’ in English schools. There also appears to be a closer alignment in Finland between the sorts of values and relationships that circulate schools and the immediate community and a de-alignment between those that exist in schools in England and the community in which those schools are located.

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. One outcome of this particular Student Voice initiative has been encouraging to those that believe ideas can, with careful development, migrate national boundaries successfully and become incorporated locally. Although not quoted in this paper, all six participants talked about how they witnessed Finnish students discussing ‘safety’ and ‘happiness’ within the school and the community. Maps, diagrams and drawings of places within and beyond school boundaries were used to get pupils to talk about where they felt ‘safe’, ‘comfortable’, ‘scared’, ‘relaxed’ etc. All six student researchers found this particular initiative ‘powerful’ and ‘useful’ and have brought this back to their school Student Voice body in England. In conjunction with the local police and local council a similar project, in consultation with these student researchers and the school student voice body, is now being piloted within the local community of the school. This has been made possible, in part, because of how the local police and local council were ‘impressed’ by the ‘experience’ and ‘confidence’ they acknowledged as a ‘defining characteristic’ of the school’s student voice body. The school has acknowledged that this is not coincidence but rather the product of four years of passion, commitment and partnership between the school and the university. Top-down policies, without meaningful dialogue and consultation with the very people these policies directly affect cannot, and never should, be enacted upon. However when top-down meets ‘bottom-up’ then incremental, yet radical change, involving schools, parents and the local community is possible. One starting point is to trust young people in the ways that these student researchers clearly believe their counterparts are trusted in Finland. 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.

Conclusions

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’ (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006:225) that exists in many schools in England can increase hope in an increasingly convoluted world. Often couched in terms of inevitability, such an ideology can drain energy and commitment from both learners and teachers. This case study illustrates how young people, if trusted and listened to, have the potential to transform school processes, purposes and procedures. The voices, sensitivities, and expertise of the learners in this study and their concerns give rise to complex hope in exceedingly complex times. Educational policies perceived as effective in one national setting can be ‘borrowed’ (Green, 1996) and/or implemented in other national settings. However if sweeping changes are to be made to the English education system along the lines that Michael Gove is suggesting, it is time perhaps to reflect on the research carried out by the six young student researchers that this paper reports on whilst fully accepting that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy agenda may not necessarily be the way forward. As Phelan (2000) notes: “Best practice like good wine doesn’t always travel well - it needs testing in cultural situ” (Phelan, 2000: 26).

**Bibliography**


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