

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES AND TEACHER PRACTICES: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL

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ABSTRACT. Over the last twenty years or so – and despite extensive programmes of mandated reform – schools have changed less in their deep structures and patterns of relationship than young people have changed. School improvement, in our view, is about enhancing engagement through achieving a better fit between young people and the school as an institution; it is not just about raising the profile of a school's test scores. The paper explores the transformative potential of taking our improvement agenda from students as the key stakeholders. What students have to say about their experiences as learners in schools can lead to significant and realistic change – particularly in building a stronger sense of partnership with teachers. So, despite the climate of performativity, where students' grades seem to matter more than their engagement with learning, teachers and students together may be able, if their spirit can 'transcend the cramped conditions of the time' (Tanner, 1987), to construct a new status and a new order of experience for students in schools.

POINTS DE VUE DES ÉLÈVES ET PRATIQUES DES ENSEIGNANTS : LE POTENTIEL DE TRANSFORMATION

RÉSUMÉ. Depuis une vingtaine d'années, et en dépit de nombreux programmes de réformes obligatoires, les écoles ont moins changé dans leurs structures profondes et leur modes relationnels que les jeunes. L'amélioration des écoles, à notre avis, consiste à améliorer l'engagement en instaurant de meilleurs rapports entre les jeunes et l'école en tant qu'établissement; cela ne consiste pas seulement à rehausser le profil des résultats d'une école. Cet article étudie le potentiel de transformation en prenant les élèves comme principaux intervenants du programme de réforme. Ce que les élèves ont à dire sur leurs expériences d'apprenants dans les écoles peut entraîner des changements profonds et réalistes, notamment en instaurant un plus puissant sentiment de partenariat avec les professeurs. Cela est difficile dans le climat actuel de rendement, où il semble que les notes des élèves revêtent plus d'importance que leur engagement envers leurs études. Toutefois, ensemble, professeurs et élèves, sous réserve que leur esprit puisse « transcender les conditions étriquées de l'époque » (Tanner, 1987), pourront également bâtir une nouvelle situation et un nouvel ordre d'expérience pour les élèves dans les écoles.

Background and focus

When central bodies try to change schools they use the big building blocks – a new curriculum, new systems of tests and testing – along with incentives and strategies designed to ensure conformity to key policies. But over the last twenty years or so – and despite extensive programs of mandated reform – schools have changed less in their deep structures and patterns of relationship than young people have changed. Many young people are involved in and know how to manage the social dynamics of complex relationships and situations, both within the peer group and the family ('Observe the way they draw on a whole range of social strategies as if they were constructing their own micro-society'; Wyness, 2000, p. 88). Many are skilled in balancing multiple responsibilities and competing loyalties. Schools, in contrast, often offer less challenge, responsibility and autonomy than they are accustomed to in their lives outside school. Disengagement is a likely consequence.

The young people in our schools today are 'the first generation to have experienced, from their infancy, what Lyotard (1984) calls the "computerization of society"' (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, pp. 16-17). Called the Y Generation, they are said to have more money to spend, to have more opportunities for self-expression and the creation of different identities, and to be more influential in family investments. Many seem to live 'the "important" parts of their lives elsewhere – out of class, out of school' (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 56). It is not surprising therefore to hear comments like Nieto's (1994), from the US, 'Educating students today is a far different and more complex proposition than it has been in the past'; and this from a teacher in Australia: 'It is so hard to be a teacher these days. Kids are so different' (quoted by Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 1).

In our view, school improvement is about enhancing engagement through achieving a better fit between young people and the school as an institution. It is not just about raising the profile of a school's test scores; it is, literally and logically, about the *improvement of schools*, their organizational structures, regimes and relationships, what we have called 'the conditions of learning' (Rudduck et al., 1996). Achieving change in the basic conditions of learning in schools, as Watson and Fullan (1992) have said, 'will not happen by accident, good will or. . . *ad hoc* projects. It requires new structures, new activities, and a re-thinking of the internal workings of each institution.'

Taking our agenda for change from students as the key stakeholders can be a powerful way forward. Hearing students talk about their experiences as learners in schools has challenged assumptions, provoked reflection and has led to changes, both nationally and at school level, that are making a

difference. These changes are a clear testament to the importance of what pupils have to say as expert witnesses in discussions of teaching, learning and schooling. We know that from an early age in school 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 will use them strategically to avoid learning in school and conspire unwittingly in the process of their own under-achievement.

However, student voice has not been seen as a vote winner by governments, whether on the right or left. Indeed, in England the appeal of student consultation has been bruised by association with the child-centred, progressive agenda which had contributed, it was claimed, to *laissez-faire* education and to the lowering of standards (see Darling, 1994). We would argue, however, that far from lowering standards, involving students more in the day to day business of the school as a learning community is likely to enhance their engagement with learning and their progress as learners. Sammons *et al.* (1997) and Gray *et al.* (1999), drawing on correlational analyses of school effectiveness studies, have suggested that schools achieving more rapid progress were those which 'had actively sought pupils' views as well as giving them more prominent roles' in school.

We would go further and suggest that the transformative potential of student consultation and participation goes beyond the usual confines of school effectiveness and improvement to affect school regimes; it challenges traditional images of 'childhood' (which are still influential in many schools) and enables young people to develop more positive identities as learners.

In support of this argument we want to explore three questions: What's in it for pupils?, What's in it for teachers?, and What's in it for schools?

Sources of data

There are two main arenas for talking to students. First, outsider researchers may go into schools to 'collect data' from students; the advantage of this approach is that the researchers can make public students' perspectives on key areas of their experiences in school and demonstrate, to a wider audience, the capability of young people to comment insightfully on issues affecting their lives and learning. Second, there are teachers within schools who are working to build a more inclusive and participatory community where young people can offer constructive critiques of teaching and learning, help design units of learning, act as mentors to their peers, and work with teachers to tackle persistent problems, such as bullying.

The data we draw on come largely from an initiative called *Consulting Students about Teaching and Learning* (2000-2003); it is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Teaching and

Learning Research Program and it is coordinated by Jean Rudduck. It consists of six school-focused projects, several of them referred to in the text, and a meta-study which explores some of the substantive and methodological issues of student voice research. Three of the sub-projects are in the research mode where the research team's agenda leads the data gathering in schools, although data are shared and discussed with teachers. Three projects are teacher-led with support provided by members of the research team. Helen Demetriou is a member of the research team working on a project which identified, in partnership with teachers, different ways of consulting students, taking into account the age of the students and the social contexts of the schools.

The aims of the overall initiative are these:

- to demonstrate the serious and constructive contributions that students can make to teaching, learning and to school organization;
- to demonstrate the different roles and responsibilities that students can take in schools;
- to offer basic support and guidance for teachers who are new to consultation and who want to initiate some form of consultation process;
- to offer support and guidance to teachers who want to extend the principle of consultation on a whole-school basis and extend students' participation.

What's in it for pupils?

First, a broad and predictable response: being heard is important to young people. A recent survey in a national newspaper in England (Birkett, *The Guardian*, June 2001) asked students (aged 5 to 16) to describe 'The school I'd like.' There were over 15,000 responses. Nine key features were identified and two were about consultation. Top of the list were these: 'A beautiful school; A comfortable school; A safe school.' Fourth in the list was this: 'A listening school – with students on governing bodies, class representatives and the chance to choose teachers.' And seventh on the list was 'A respectful school – where children and adults can talk freely and student opinion matters.' These ratings confirm the data from our interviews with young people – being able to voice an opinion matters. But that is not enough. Young people want teachers to take action on what they have heard or, if there are differences of view within the pupil group, to explain why some actions are preferred or why only limited action is possible. In recent conversations with 11 year old pupils who had failed to gain a place in the high schools they wanted to move to and whose comments revealed the pain and stigma of rejection, one said, 'You know you've asked us if there

is anything we'd like to change? (Well) If there's anything that they can do (about it), will it happen?" (Urquhart, 2001, p. 86).

Our data, across the projects, suggest that being able to talk about your experiences of learning in school and having your account taken seriously offers students four things:

- a stronger sense of membership - *the organizational dimension* - so that they feel positive about school;
- a stronger sense of respect and self worth - *the personal dimension* - so that they feel positive about themselves;
- a stronger sense of self-as-learner – *the pedagogic dimension* – so that they are better able to manage their own progress in learning;
- a stronger sense of agency – *the political dimension* - so that they see it as worthwhile becoming involved in school matters and contributing to the improvement of teaching and learning.

These are all things that could make a difference to pupils' engagement with learning; the transformative potential is considerable but there are dangers and students can be short-changed. First, there is the question posed by Arnot *et al.* (2001): in the acoustic of the school whose voice gets listened to? If the school claims to be supporting student voice, can students be certain that the familiar dividing practices (Meadmore, 1993) are not still operating? Students will be justifiably cynical if, within a framework of promise, attention and respect continue to go to some students in the school – the ones the school values most highly – and not to others.

For example, Mitra (2001) discusses the attempts of an ethnically and socially mixed group of students trying to work together on projects that give them responsibility and power:

When the group first came together as a community of practice, they didn't yet have the language to articulate who they were. And this contributed to their struggles to agree upon a joint enterprise. . . . The students needed to get along with students different than them – students from different cliques, who speak different languages, who are different tracks in the school's academic system. (Mitra, 2001)

One of the problems was the feeling among some that those who were more articulate in the language of the school establishment were more likely to shape the decisions of the group, leaving others feeling disenfranchised in an initiative specifically designed to empower them.

Silva (2001) discusses a similar problem. One of the members of the school's student reform group that she describes, an African American male, iden-

tifies two broad types of student in the school – and, as it turned out, in the group:

We've got squeaky wheels and flat tyres. . . . Some smooth white wheels rollin' their way right up to college, getting oil all the way. And then the rest of us. . . . Flat tyres! Bumpin' on down the road, making all sorts of crude noises. Probably fall off real soon anyway. Ain't worth the grease. (Silva, 2001)

Silva comments on the problems in the group's working together which were symbolised in language. The group 'had to be diverse in order to work but the white female students at school had different views and a different language from black students who had experienced marginalisation. The latter wanted the group to be challenging and activist. . . . In comparison the successful students, predominantly white, expected the group to be less reformist' (Silva, 2001, p. 5). Silva concludes: 'The story of these students illustrates how efforts to increase student voice and participation can actually reinforce a hierarchy of power and privilege among students and undermine attempted reforms' (p. 12).

In our own research the divisions in the student groups have not been so stark but they are there. For example, one of our projects, *Pupil consultation and the social conditions of learning: class, gender and race* (see Arnot et al., 2001) has worked with secondary schools in contrasting settings and focused on differences perceived and experienced by students – not as a consequence of consultation but as part of their everyday experience of learning. The students were asked whether they felt that they were respected members of the class and the school and whether they thought they were able to influence how lessons were conducted. Typically, high-achieving, middle class girls felt more in control of their identities as learners and of their learning in contrast with lower-achieving working class boys who saw their identities and their agency as learners shaped by factors beyond their control.

Another risk to the – initially often fragile – credibility of student consultation is captured in Hart's (1997) ladder. The ladder offers a pattern of progress from mere tokenism and decorative fashion-following to more authentic and empowering ways of involving students. The word 'decorative' is significant because at the moment consulting students on a one-off basis as a quick source of information is so widespread a practice that the deeper purposes and the potential for transformation may not be thought about (see Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Fielding (2001) constructed three stages in the involvement of students:

STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3
<p><i>A: Pupils as sources of data</i></p>	<p><i>B: Pupils as active respondents</i></p>	<p><i>C: Pupils as (co) researchers</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teacher responds to reported data on pupil perspectives originating from outside the school, or collects survey data internally; • pupils in the school are not involved in discussion of the data; • there is no feedback; • teacher plans action on basis of data and monitors impact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teacher involves pupils in the interpretation of data (which may have come from a source in or outside the school); • pupils explore data in relation to their experiences of teaching and learning; • teacher plans action in the light of the data and discussion of data and monitors impact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pupils and teacher identify and discuss one or more problems in their work together; • they plan and initiate an enquiry in order to understand the problem better (this can serve as base-line data against which to judge progress); • together they plan action in the light of the data and review the impact of the intervention.

We recognize that many schools at the moment are in – or are contemplating moving into – the first stage, where pupils are ‘sources of data.’ This stage offers a practical agenda for school improvement and students may be aware that they – or students from elsewhere – have helped shape that agenda. It can make a difference to the improvement of teaching and learning but does less for student empowerment. In the next stage pupils are more actively involved in the interpretation of externally derived data and may be asked to compare it with their own experiences. In the third stage students and teacher together identify a problem, plan and initiate an enquiry and plan action in the light of data from the enquiry. Mitra’s and Silva’s students were clearly at the third stage.

Another danger, of course, is the routinisation of student consultation at a superficial level – and we have heard students say, with a bored compliance, ‘Oh no – they want our opinions *again*.’

What’s in it for teachers?

There are two possible gains for teachers: a sharper awareness of young people’s capabilities; and, a practical agenda for improvement.

First, then, teachers’ perceptions of young people. Teachers remain, at the moment, the gatekeepers of change in school. To unlock the transformative

potential of student perspective and participation we have to help teachers 'see' students differently. What Grace (1995) calls, 'the ideology of immaturity' is still pervasive in some schools. Only a few weeks ago a researcher on our boys' achievement project, reporting on how – and whether – schools explained a shift to single sex teaching to students, received the reply that 12-13 year old students were 'too young to express an opinion' (internal report). As Wyness observes, 'In many contexts and for a variety of reasons, the child as a subordinate subject is a compelling and sometimes necessary conception of modern childhood' – and, we would add – of modern studenthood (2000, p. 1).

What helps teachers to see students differently? Quite often it is reading the insightful comments on teaching and learning in reports on research into student voices – and even more compelling are the comments from their own students. In another of our projects, *How teachers respond to and use pupil perspectives to improve teaching and learning*, the team worked with teachers to develop consultation practices in different subjects. Here the head of maths in a secondary school talks about her work with 12-13 year old students; she had been encouraging and using feedback on her maths lessons:

One girl in particular clearly seemed to understand – better than I did! – how she learned. Some, interestingly, were immediately reflective in a highly sophisticated way – beyond my expectation – but nobody had known that before because nobody had asked them. For others the reflection grew through the process of reflection. (Webb, 2001)

Another of our projects set out to identify manageable strategies for talking about learning in both primary and secondary schools. The head of a small primary school that contributed to the study commented on the early stages of building a school-wide commitment to involving her young students in talking about learning:

I started to look with the children at what they thought learning was. . . . They told me that if they're told what to do, they just listen and then do it, really. But as soon as they had to be responsive, then they would realise that their understanding wasn't as good as they thought it was . . . I think that was really important because there's now two-way exchange most of the time in the classroom. . . . Children very freely now say, "Can you go over that again, I don't understand it." . . . They (need) that freedom to come back.' (Rayner, 2001)

A character in a play by Stoppard² said that reality can often become a 'blur in the corner of your eye' and that, in the repetitions of our working lives, we often need something to 'nudge it (back) into existence.' Comments from students can have this power; they challenge assumptions and lead the teacher to 'see' students as they are and not as they have been historically – and conveniently – constructed to fit the regimes of schooling. They are

their own advocates but they are supported now by a range of other voices which remind us of the need to see, value and use students' capacities. For example, Apple and Beane (1999), in their recent book, *Democratic Schools*, argue strongly that educators should help young people to 'seek out a range of ideas and to voice their own.' Soo Hoo (1993) argues that 'Traditionally students have been overlooked as valuable resources in the re-structuring of schools' (p. 392). And Hodgkin says this:

The fact is that pupils themselves have a huge potential contribution to make, not as passive objects but as active players in the education system. Any legislation concerning school standards will be seriously weakened if it fails to recognise the importance of that contribution. (1998, p. 11)

As teachers see students differently so they are more likely to respect and trust them and offer more opportunities for them to take responsibility for learning and for the management of their learning. And this is what students say they want.

We have been discussing the importance of 're-profiling' students in teachers' eyes but we should not underestimate the practical value of student commentaries on teaching and learning – what helps them to learn and what gets in the way of their learning. The commentaries may be elicited by direct questioning or they may be identified more casually by teachers simply 'tuning in' to the messages students send that are not always heard. For instance, teachers learned a lot when 15-16 year old male students, in interviews about what turned them off learning, started to talk about the difficulty of changing from being a 'dosser' to a 'worker.' They communicated vividly the difficulty of changing an image that was held in place by various people's expectations. One talked about becoming 'addicted' to messing about and the difficulty of kicking the habit. One talked about how his mates were disappointed if he didn't continue to muck about in lessons; another said that most teachers never forgot the bad things he'd done and that his favourite teacher was the one who said that every lesson was a clean slate – for her, a forgetting rather than a remembering. Another described how little praise he got because of his reputation as a nuisance in classes:

No-one's praised me in quite a long time actually. But I think they're used to me being a trouble-maker and they don't want to go back on themselves by praising me. I'd faint if they did. No, I'd be happy 'cos I would have done something and they've like, praised me for it. I mean, I got suspended and, um, I felt really out of order, and I did [a voluntary punishment] for a week, I offered to do it and I think they praised me for a bit but they haven't actually said it to me. (Brown, 2001, field work notes)

And another, showing a greater empathy with teachers than they seem to have felt for him, said this:

Me personally, I've brought a reputation upon myself. I'm known to be the class clown and that, and it's got me in a lot of trouble. And so I've decided to change and it's just really hard to, like, show the teachers that 'cos . . . and when, like, I went on report and I got, like, A1, A1, best, top marks, but there's just been some lessons where it's slipped and they're like 'Oh, he's still the same.' I can understand how they feel about that. (Brown, 2001, field work notes)

Such comments help us towards a better understanding of the support that students need and the difficulties that students face who want to settle down to work but feel trapped by the images others hold of them.

A more straightforward agenda is the problem of noise in classrooms that prevents students – of all ages – from concentrating. The head of a primary school, dismayed by the number of young students complaining about noise, set up a working group with representatives from each year group to discuss the problem and to come up with a solution. They agreed on a colour coding (pale blue for your talking one to one voice; red for your playground voice, and so on). The code was typed up and distributed around the school and the students felt able to enforce the code themselves since they, rather than their teachers, had devised it.

Student commentaries have enabled us to 'read' the messages that schools send out about what matters in school and how this influences their investment of effort; they have helped us re-balance the emphasis at transfer from primary to secondary school on the social and the academic aspects of induction; they have enabled us to understand how important it is to have time for dialogue with someone they trust about problems with learning; they have made us aware how frustrating it is not to be able to complete a task they are committed to because of the boundaries of lesson times. They offer an agenda that is rooted in the realities of *their* everyday world.

It is perhaps not surprising that teachers, anxious to escape the increasing bureaucratization of their work, see student consultation as a way of bringing the relationship of learner, learning and teacher together – restoring it to its rightful place at the centre of professional practice. The energy that comes from building a productive partnership with students is exemplified in the words of an English teacher from the project, mentioned earlier, which focused on how teachers in different subjects use pupil commentaries on their lessons to improve teaching and learning:

You know, that's what made me enthusiastic because I suddenly saw all that untapped creativity really. . . . You can use pupils' ideas in a very valid, interesting way and it can make the pupil excited, the teacher excited and you know obviously the lessons will take off from there. . . . It's like going on a teachers' conference and sort of thinking, "Oh, that's a good idea" and planning a series of lessons together. You know. . . . Although you do a bit of collaborating together with other teachers,

there's not that much time any more so, you know, if you can actually collaborate with pupils its equally - I didn't realise it – it's equally exciting isn't it? (Pedder, 2001)

For teachers, tuning in to what students rather than what policy makers say is a professionally re-creative act.

What's in it for schools?

We would say that there are two main gains for schools: A stronger sense of the school as a learning community, and, in the present climate, a commitment to 'enacting' and not merely 'teaching about' citizenship.

Ted Aoki (1984) once said that learning in school should be a 'communal venturing forth together.' But we all know that it is often not like that. The traditional power regimes can mark out an 'us' and 'them' relationship between students and teachers; the familiar dividing practices (Meadmore, *op. cit.*) separate out the students whose achievement is valued by the school and those whose work is not valued. Schools need support in the task of 'reshaping long standing structures that have fostered disconnection, separateness, division', features that have prevented teachers and students in schools from 'sharing powerful ideas about how to make schools better' (Warsley *et al.*, 1997, p. 204).

The transformative impulse – with its 'more intrusive agenda' (Fielding, 1997) – seeks to change the status and sense of agency of students, bringing them in from the margins so that their voices can be heard. This means establishing processes whereby dialogue with students would become 'part of the normal way a school goes about its daily work' (Fielding; *ibid*); there might be an 'institutional requirement' that pupils would be partners in regular dialogues which would 'inform the life and development of the community.'

Ensuring that students see themselves as stake-holders in the institutional enterprise of learning moves us closer to Aoki's vision. But we know that it takes time for teachers and students to learn to work together to build a climate in which they feel comfortable in managing a constructive review of the teaching and learning in their schools.

If we appreciate how much young people value being consulted, how it gives them a stronger sense of their school as inclusive learning community and how insightful and constructive their points of view can be, then we may give serious thought to reviewing the traditional structures of schooling in ways that are appropriate to the maturity and analytic insight of young people today.

The politically acceptable justification for student consultation is of course school improvement but the recent renewal of interest in citizenship edu-

cation supports the principle of student voice within an empowerment frame. Here, we have to distinguish between teaching *about* citizenship and ensuring that in the daily life of schools pupils *experience* citizenship (Rudduck, 1999): the meaning of democracy has to be demonstrated and lived – not merely described.

The next step, then, is to build more opportunities for participation and consultation into the fabric of school and while we may see the school council as the vehicle for ‘delivery’, the council only works well if it is at the centre of school-wide democratic practice. If the school council does not go beyond the predictable agenda of uniform and school dinners (important as these are in the school lives of young people) and take on issues of teaching and learning and the conditions of learning, then it can become merely a way of channelling student complaints – an exercise in damage limitation rather than an opportunity for real and constructive debate.

Fashion or foundation for ‘a new order of experience’?

Research in the social sciences has asked powerful questions about the status of young people both in and outside schools. Young people are constantly presented, they argue, as in a state of ‘*becoming*’ rather than as ‘*being*’ actors in their own right. This view of young people as ‘inadequately socialised’ future adults (James & Prout, 1997, p. xiv) still retains a powerful hold on the structures of schooling. Schools (Aries, 1962) have been described as a period of ‘quarantine’ between childhood and adulthood, and as the school leaving age is raised so the period during which young people remain as ‘uneasy, stranded beings’ (Silver & Silver, 1997) becomes longer. Research into student voice is enabling us to confront the implications of a situation that we have for too long seen as ‘the natural order of things.’

If we have a concern at the moment it is with the ‘fashionableness’ of student voice. As Barnett (1953) said, some innovations are so appealing that they ‘can hardly keep pace with the rumour of their own invention.’ Consulting students is a bit like this: it has become so popular that in a climate of short-termism the interest may burn out before its transformative potential has been fully understood.

So, despite the climate of performativity, where students’ grades matter more than their engagement with learning, teachers and students together may be able, if their spirit can ‘transcend the cramped conditions of the time’ (Tanner, 1987), to construct a new status and a new order of experience for students in schools.

NOTE

1. Members of the project team: Madeleine Arnot, Sara Bragg, Nick Brown, Nichola Daily, Helen Demetriou, Michael Fielding, Julia Flutter, Caroline Lanskey, John MacBeath,

Donald McIntyre, Kate Myers, David Pedder, Diane Reay, Jean Rudduck (co-ordinator) and Beth Wang.

2. The play by Tom Stoppard is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

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