

Student voice-by-numbers

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Abstract

This article examines research on a case study of student voice brought about through collaboration between a secondary school (for pupils aged 11–16) and a university located in a large conurbation in southern England. While the original focus of this longitudinal study was to look at students as informants/respondents and their journey in becoming student researchers, this article examines the impact on the values of six pupils after their research visit to a school in Finland.

Keywords: trust; student voice; accountability; policy technology.

Introduction

Fielding (2009) describes 'student voice' as 'a portmanteau term', and, as 'student voice', 'pupil voice' and 'learner voice' are concepts often used synonymously, the author has reluctantly done likewise in this article when reviewing some of the literature. However, the term 'voice' should be used cautiously. As Robinson and Taylor note, not only are 'monolingual assumptions illusory' (Robinson & Taylor 2006: 6) but, as we shall see in this article, 'voice' encompasses much more than the speech of the speaker. The article introduces readers to competing narratives associated with student voice. It then explores the context in which the case study takes place including a brief overview of the Finnish education system, and this is followed by a presentation and analysis of some of the interview data with student-researchers visiting a school in Finland. The methodology, findings and overall conclusions can be found in more detail in the publication from which this article draws (Czerniawski & Garlick 2011).

Student voice – conflicting narratives

It is widely acknowledged (Flutter & Rudduck 2004; Halsey et al. 2008) that there are considerable benefits to some educational stakeholders when young learners are consulted about schooling, and these include: improvements in student services; improvements in decision-making; greater democracy for learners; fulfilling legal requirements within schools; enhancing children's skills; and empowering child self-esteem. 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)

'Voice' is therefore used as 'strategic shorthand' recognising its limitations (Robinson & Taylor 2006: 6) and its multiple contestations. Broadly speaking, these contestations fit comfortably within two competing narratives. The first situates student voice within discourses that relate to empowerment, democratic education, transformation and radical pedagogy (Giroux 1986; Fielding and Bragg 2003; Lodge 2005; Taylor and Robinson 2009). The second narrative positions student voice as a policy technology (Ball 2001) embodying tokenism, regimes of audit and instrumentalism leading to greater organisational

efficiency and the enhanced competitive positioning of the school (Fielding and Bragg 2003; Reay 2006; Gunter and Thomson 2007).

Student voice at 'East Valley' School

'East Valley' Comprehensive Secondary School (pseudonym) consists of approximately 860 learners and is located in a predominantly white working-class semi-industrial catchment area in a conurbation in southern England. The school has been described as 'outstandingly effective' in a recent government inspection report (reference retained for ethical purposes) and many of its teachers and students have represented the school at high-profile national events showcasing good practice including its work on student voice. The student voice project which this article explores was launched in January 2007 at the school by members of the Senior Management Team (SMT). This article 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. 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 Finnish School System that we could try to introduce here at [East Valley]' (quotation taken from presentation by students to their school governors). The volunteering students, aged between 15 and 16 years old, were members of the executive student voice body at the school and were allowed to take part in the research based on a variety of criteria including attendance, behaviour, affordability and the degree to which they are up to date with school assignments.

Contrasting educational contexts

Nordic countries have a longer and more firmly embedded tradition of democratic participatory education than does England (Czerniawski 2010). Unlike the variety of school types that exist in England, in general Finnish schools are 'schools for all', i.e. there is little or no differentiation or selection. A number of features have been identified that characterise Finnish schooling, including: professional trust in teachers; cultural and social homogeneity; children starting compulsory education at the age of seven; teachers trained in academic universities to master's level; no mandatory tests or exams; stakeholders from local businesses, parent bodies and universities working in close consultation with schools in the delivery of new educational initiatives; educational decisions made by a collaboration of all political parties and organisations; and the development of 'Professional Learning Communities', where school

leaders enable teachers to share good practice, enrich ideas and match the needs of the learners to the local economic development (Maes 2010; Ofsted 2010). 'Quiethaven School' (pseudonym) in western Finland was established in the last decade and came about following the merger of the town's primary and secondary schools. Most primary and secondary schooling in Finland is combined, avoiding a potentially disruptive transition from one school to another (Burridge 2010). A total of 616 learners attend 'Quiethaven School', with over 70 staff, in what is a relatively ethnically monocultural catchment area. The school works with parents and the local community to maintain a sustainable ethos and it prides itself on the work carried out promoting sustainable development and community engagement.

Findings

Despite the intensive preparatory sessions they received in England prior to their departure to Finland, all six participants expressed surprise on arrival in Finland at what they saw as 'fundamental differences' from what they were expecting, with one participant stating that he 'never considered that education could be so different'. One of the first things they noticed was the fact that most of the schools they drove past and the one they carried out their research at did not have fences, as Rhianna observes:

Over the past few years, we've had a fence put up, it's kind of, I don't know 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' ... whereas there it is open ... there's a lot of trust. You see mums and dads using the playground in the evenings for their kids. That would never happen at our school. [Rhianna, 15 years old]

In-depth coding of the interview data revealed that trust was inextricably linked, by five of the six students, with a sense of 'community' and 'closeness' they felt existed within and beyond the school borders. It was widely felt, for example, 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'. Rita 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 it's nowhere near. [Rita, 15 years old]

'Respect' and 'trust' were often used interchangeably by participants, with James saying on his return from Finland that 'our school [East Valley] talks a lot about "trust" but whether they actually have it is another matter'. A combination of what these young researchers felt as 'cultural' and 'institutional' differences accounted for an overwhelming sense of 'mutual respect' between learners and teachers, said to exist by all six student researchers and explained as follows by one of them:

Teachers trust them [Finnish learners] in ways that they don't us, 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 ... but not to the teachers as such, but to each other and themselves ... 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.'
[Joe, 16 years old]

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. Joe explains further:

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 it's those little things between them – the teacher–pupil relationship. It made it much more easy – a much more easy ambience in class.

Almost all students contrasted the more egalitarian relationships between Finnish teachers and learners 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 'trusting', 'informal', 'friendly' and 'first-name' based relationships that they said Finnish teachers cultivated with their learners. Olssen et al. (2004) have discussed the ways in which professional trust has been eroded by neoliberal accountability practices of monitoring, reporting, recording and surveillance associated with aspects of economic globalisation and particularly pervasive in the English educational context. Four students contrasted a 'happier' and 'trusting' environment with what they saw as a more 'pressurised', 'competitive' and 'exam-based' culture in England. While 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 her own school with her perception of the school she visited in Finland:

'I don't think people enjoy school here [England] ... they're forced to come to school. I think it's all to do with this relaxed happy atmosphere that they 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, I think sometimes we're just seen as a set of statistics, which isn't really a nice thing to be.'
[Rhianna, 15 years old]

Almost all agreed that the system was better, with one student asking 'why can't 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.

Discussion

The start of this article drew attention to the fact that Fielding (2001) has argued that many student voice projects can act as a catalyst for change in schools including improvements to student–teacher relationships. These student researchers believed they possessed trusting relationships with many of their teachers in 'East Valley' prior to their departure to Finland. But then again, why would they question 'trust' as constructed, positioned and situated within an institutional setting and context they have been socialised into? Their perceptions of the synthetic trust experienced in their school in England are partially grounded within school-based structures, procedures and cultural values that obscure a 'gulf in trust' (Leitch and Mitchell 2007) between learners and teachers despite the rhetoric of student voice participation. In fact, it is only by taking student researchers out of their own institutions to research and interpret a world elsewhere that young learners can possibly hope to bring back critically informed perspectives of benefit to them and their schools and avoid interpreting the already interpreted world of education they know. Strikingly apparent from these interviews is the perception by these student researchers of fundamentally different sets of relationships between teachers and learners cultivated in the Finnish school they visited, and the impact that these relationships had on the learning environments they observed. While

some might attribute this to a different type of culture, one that is less populated, more rural, more ethnically monocultural and so on, a lot more, in the eyes of these student researchers, is to do with institutional arrangements and trusting relationships forged in the school they visited.

Lodge (2008) notes that there has been a shift away from the 19th- and 20th-century 'children-should-be-seen-and-not-heard' perceptions of childhood towards more child-centred discourses that now 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' (Grace 1995) 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 their ability to reflect on issues affecting their education. Tensions exist between this ideology and more marketised, consumer-based ideologies in schools in which the student voice agenda can fit, albeit for more instrumentalist purposes.

Although schools in England have made significant changes to the ways in which they assess and teach young learners, 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 identified by Rudduck (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 ... [W]e 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: 123-4)

The question still remains, how can schools become more able to embrace student voice and work towards a better future for all? The key seems, from these interviews, to be in the feeling of being trusted, respected – both by staff and fellow students.

Opportunities to develop a passion for learning in young people (and teachers) are frequently tarnished by the cultures of performativity that increasingly characterise formal education in the 21st century.

And while all professionals are said to have an 'ethics of care' (Noddings 1992) where caring forms the foundation for any ethical decision-making that the job entails, how this is worked through in terms of what it is to be a teacher is context-specific and culturally situated. Bringing about the transformation associated with those writers adhering to that first student voice narrative will require substantial changes in the nested cultures permeating schools, colleges and teacher education institutions. Such transformation will take time but must happen.

Concluding comments

Material conditions partially determine and constrain student voice initiatives, as do the values and the existing commitments of young people and the teachers who teach them. Accompanying huge improvements in so many aspects of education, including the student voice movement, is a pervasive form of instrumentalism. We need to move away from student voice being viewed as a tool to improve measurable outcomes, 'student voice-by-numbers' if you like, to one in which the voices of young people shape and determine new institutions of education, redefining current and future generations' conceptions of the importance and substance of both formal and informal education.

At the start of this article I referred to two competing narratives embedded within the literature on student voice. This case study illustrates how contextually sensitive young researchers identified 'trust' as a culturally situated and embedded value within an educational environment radically different from the one they were used to. The voices, sensitivities and expertise of these young researchers in this study and their concerns give rise to complex hope in exceedingly complex times. The escalation of market forces in education internationally means that many learners and teachers are 'now working within a new value context in which image and impression management ... are becoming as important as the educational process' (Ball 2001: 13). It would therefore be a tragedy if the zeitgeist devotion to student voice gets reduced to a 'rhetoric of agency' (Gunter and Thomson 2007) associated with the second of the two narratives discussed at the start of this article, namely that which embodies tokenism, instrumentalism and the enhanced competitive positioning of the school.

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