Some people just don't think like the rest of us!

Chimney pots on the roof of La Casa Mila, Barcelona, Spain. A glimpse into the mind of Antoni Gaudi, architect.

STUDENT VOICE: A PASSING FASHION OR FOUNDATION FOR LEARNING?
Deanna Johnston

Introduction

Student voice has become a fashionable concept or 'buzz word' used in schools. What does student voice mean and why has it emerged in the school setting? This article explores some relevant literature and research around the growing popularity and concept of pupil or student voice. Challenges and benefits of student voice will be included. Links between student voice and Inquiry Learning in the primary classroom context will also be highlighted for strengthening student engagement and classroom feedback.

The views of young people have in the past three decades been excluded from conversations about teaching, learning and schooling in general. Traditionally, the views of young people have been dismissed as having less legitimacy than those of adults. However, research suggests that attitudes towards young people or students have shifted resulting in the growing profile of student voice. This profile entails students having an opportunity for sharing their views about teaching, learning and school life. These changes reflect positive shifts in improving teaching and learning processes; teacher and student relationships; learning engagement and student self-esteem. The perspectives of students are gaining legitimacy.

The premise for student voice is implied within the New Zealand Curriculum's national vision for young people as confident, connected and actively involved life-long learners (Ministry of Education, 2007). Similarly, too, student voice is linked in tandem with a recent national statement and other discussion around authenticating or 'personalising learning' for students (Hargreaves, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2006; OECD, 2006).

Changing views of children

Dominant views of children have explained them as dependent, passive and compliant – they are to be 'seen and not heard'. Children have been considered incomplete spectators of life or unreliable constructors of social meaning (Cheminais, 2008). Both educational policy and practice has been shaped by the underlying assumption that childhood is about dependency (Mayall, 2002; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). A preoccupation with child incompleteness and dependency has overlooked opportunities for students to participate in decisions about their lives or for exercising responsibility in the classroom setting (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Oakley, 1994). Schools and classrooms are essentially rule bound settings where teachers or adults traditionally represent authority. Teachers are traditionally the change agents or decision makers. Adult positions of authority and organisational structures can be barriers to students, lessening their agency for change when adults are primarily the decision makers.

Sociologists James, Jenks and Prout (1998) have contributed towards a new way of thinking about adult and child relationships and power dynamics which acknowledge the diverse voices of children. Their position confronts traditional representations of adult authority and dominant explanations of the child (James & James, 2008). These authors assert that the child is active in the construction of their social world and competent in their own right. Children are thus positioned as social actors who are capable of demonstrating personal agency. These assertions become apparent especially when democratic dialogue is impeded by any power dynamics within and outside the classroom (Cook-Sather, 2002). In practice, students are thus capable of providing informative perspectives on teaching, learning and schooling which benefit both teacher and student.

Defining student voice

The terms student voice and pupil voice both appear in educational literature. Pupil voice as a term has its origins with English research. The term student voice has appeared in the United States, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand literature. Finding a singular definition for student voice can be a challenge within the school context (Cook-Sather, 2006). Student voice has come to mean different things to different people, depending on one's educational knowledge, understanding and experience of activities. Other terms associated with student voice such as student rights, consultation, participation, involvement, choice, empowerment and engagement have created ambiguity among educators (Cheminais, 2008). In its widest sense, student voice is young people's views about the conditions of teaching, learning and schooling (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Student voice becomes a

catalyst for change when teachers listen and respond to what their students say about their learning experiences (Flutter, 2007a, 2007b). Opportunities arise for teachers to explore and improve practice.

Adam Fletcher similarly defines student voice as "the individual and collective perspectives and actions of young people within the context of learning and education" (http://www.soundout.org/definition.html). He further states that the term student voice has been used to refer to a range of ways students can exercise agency and have democratic input to improve their education and school environment. Fletcher maintains that, while student voice activity will vary from school to school, it is definitely more than just simply listening to students or periodically asking for their thoughts.

Sophisticated student voice and student leadership activity can be viewed online through SoundOut! (http://www.soundout.org). Founded by Fletcher, this United States website and resource portal provides examples of defining how students and adults partner together.

The emergence of student voice

The emergence and diversity of interest in student voice within the educational field, stems back to the 1960s and 1970s, with a growing impetus in the last decade (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). This impetus has resulted in different agencies competing for different reasons. Early thinking behind student participation, rights and voice has its roots in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child, and with similar 1992 UNICEF presentations (Cheminais, 2008). Initiatives such as these assert that young people are not seen as objects but rather subjects who have their own diverse and valid views to share. However, student voice is not solely associated with young people's rights and empowerment.

Students have a strong desire to voice their views about improving their own learning and the relationships they have with their teachers (Kushman & Shanessey, 1997). The concept of student voice has grown wider in meaning. Student voice is now associated with the improvement of student self-esteem, student engagement, achievement, formative assessment, teacher development and school reform (Fielding, 2001).

Student voice activities

In practice, student voice ranges from simplistic to sophisticated approaches. These activities can include but are not confined to (Cheminais, 2008):

- Peer buddying, mentoring and tutoring;
- Student leadership roles in school or community events, assemblies and meetings;
- Focus groups, student co-researchers, student citizen groups;
- Class or school review teams;
- Teacher-student goal setting interviews;
- Student to student and teacher to student feedback conversations;

- Student school Board representatives, student fundraising or advocacy groups;
- Student interview panels; and
- Student curriculum planning teams.

Nationally, there is evidence of student voice activities emerging as part of curriculum development (http://keycompetencies.tki.org.nz/In-learning). A national example of a more sophisticated student voice approach is the "Te Awamutu – You have a message" story (http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-stories/School-stories/Te-Awamutu). In 2007, a project involving 27 year six to 13 students from the Rosetown Learning Community created a video from much discussion, planning, filming and editing. Their thinking was intended for their teachers and community about how they learn and what they want from school. Following an exploration of student values and beliefs about teaching and learning, 10 questions were co-constructed from their workshops. The next phase of this story is to pose these student questions to their teachers and community with the intention of seeking adult responses about what they want in their learning. Other student voice activities are evident in the 2009 New Zealand Enviroschools programme's one of five guiding principles i.e., Empowered Students. Four key areas provide an overview of reflective questions about enabling genuine student participation.

There is an increasing body of international literature and educational research emerging from Australia, England, Canada and the United States on the subject of student voice (Cushman, 2003; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Fletcher, 2004; Hamilton, 2006; Hargreaves, 2004; Macbeath, Demetriou, Rudduck, & Myers, 2003; Manefield, Collins, Moore, Mahar, & Warne, 2007). Commonality among these authors' thinking points to both benefits and challenges for the credible development of student voice.

Student voice challenges

The apparent popularity of student voice brings with it challenges. Learning from the views of students involves teachers and students thinking differently about issues of knowledge, power and language (Cook-Sather, 2006). Occasions for authentic and constructive dialogue between students and teachers are based on the assumption that relationships are open and trusting. Conversations need a different kind of listening - with open eyes, ears, hearts and minds (Delpit, 1988). When students are 'asked' to speak, whose interests are being served (Alverman, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1997)? What gets heard depends on who says it and the language being used. So, who is talking and who is listening? Can students articulate their thoughts, feelings and views without fear of reprisal?

A lack of understanding about student voice can lead to teachers being less responsive to an idea that appears as a contrived add-on to the busy classroom timetable. Student voice may be perceived to increase teacher workload. Student voice may be overlooked due to a lack of teacher confidence, skill or access to professional development. Adapted from Rudduck and Fielding (2006), three challenges underlie the credible development of student voice:

1. Power relations

a. Some teachers may not be prepared to 'see' young people differently – students are too young, immature or lack reliable knowledge;

b. Some teachers may be wary of giving students choice about learning (this may be seen as losing control or power);

c. Some teachers may be anxious about what students might say about their work;

d. Some Senior school leaders may have a different vision; and

e. Some students may fear retaliation or anxiety when commenting on what teachers say and do as this may be seen as 'rude' or 'wrong'.

2. Authenticity

a. Some students may not see the process of consultation and participation as credible;

b. Some students may not have been involved in determining the focus of consultation;

c. Some students may not see adults having a real interest in their views;

d. There is no active follow-through on the students' suggestions; and

e. This follow-through may not be visible to the students afterwards.

3. Inclusion

a. The more self-assured and articulate students may be dominating the consultative conversations and therefore more readily 'heard' by teachers;

b. Some teachers may not be aware of the silenced voices;

c. Some teachers may have assumed that the students have an appropriate degree of social confidence and language competence; and

d. Some teachers may not have identified which groups of students are representing or dominating the student voice of the school.

Students' views that may be seen as challenging the status quo can easily be modified by schools to conform to dominant and prevailing views. This negative accommodation becomes evident when student voice activities in classrooms and schools sit at the bottom end of Roger Hart's six rung participation ladder (1992):

3rd Rung - Tokenistic

Students appear to have a voice but there is minimal choice in subject or style of communication (no time to form their views);

2nd Rung - Decoration

Students are passive participants who do not understand why or what the event means; and

1st Rung - Manipulation

Students say what adults ask, or some of the students' ideas are used but they are not informed why.

Student voice benefits

The benefits of student voice can be seen through specific dimensions (Flutter, 2007b; Mitra, 2004; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, 2004):

1. Organisational (connectedness)

Older students' sense of belonging and connectedness to their school has shown to increase when they are consulted or respected in 'adult' ways. An inclusive school culture of self-improvement is promoted. Students become motivated to be involved in school or community initiatives.

2. Personal (self-worth)

Student voice promotes a listen-to-learn and seek-to-understand school culture. Reflective, critical and analytical thinking is advanced and practised. Students learn to clarify their personal needs, wants and to set personal goals. Teachers learn about what matters to students and they feel that their views are respected.

3. Political (agency)

Student voice activities that involve listening and adult follow-up have shown to be especially meaningful for meeting the developmental needs of youth. Adolescents or teenagers feel empowered when they are taken seriously and their aspirations are acknowledged. Adult-child partnerships are strengthened.

4. Pedagogical (teaching and learning)

Students gain greater control over their learning in terms of articulating how to improve their learning. Students' creative and critical thinking is enhanced. Students practise debating and negotiation skills. Teachers have access to additional student commentary data that is insightful. Formative assessment practice in the classroom is strengthened through timely descriptive and achievement feedback. When students' opinions are listened to and acted upon, they become refocused or re-engaged in learning (i.e., seeing the bigger picture, seeing the purpose and relevance of lessons).

The pedagogic benefits of student voice are perhaps the most significant. Students benefit from having a say about how they learn, when they learn and what helps or hinders their learning (i.e., "switch-ons" or "switch-offs"). Hamilton's (2006) Australian research with Year seven students highlights how factors enable and impede students' engagement, sense of belonging and learning. Her findings show that as teachers gained an increased understanding of their students' capabilities, teacher-student relationships and practice improved.

Student voice and links to Inquiry Learning

There is potential benefit for strengthening student voice through inquiry learning processes. For example, student voice opportunities appear in a number of phases of the Thinking-Based Learning Approach (Coote, 2010). These include, when students and teachers partner together to co-construct relevant questions. During the research phase, students and teachers have many opportunities to debate the relevancy of collated data. During whole class learning conversations, students voice their views about the dilemmas they have researched and debate their decisions with their peers. The final phase of the inquiry unit is called concluding conversations. Students present their research findings to other classes in their syndicates. The audience then enters into a concluding conversation using a ladder of feedback (Perkins, cited in Coote, 2010). Here students ask for clarification about specific information, voice what they value about their peers' work, express concerns or problems about students' ideas and make suggestions to improve future work. Not all students share the same views as their peers. Not all students will speak out against their peers. However, during this phase, student voice is evident when fellow students partner in dialogue as researchers or co-enquirers to offer feedback on learning (Jackson, 2005). These challenges are made by fellow students who are well-informed, having completed their own research. It can be said that the teacher's voice becomes less dominant.

So what's in it for the teacher on Monday morning?

As teachers we are fully aware of what it is like to navigate the many complexities of classroom learning and student-teacher relationships. However, the views of students should not be underestimated, whether those views are about issues involving difficult dilemmas or about simple classroom learning routines. Many teachers are open to listening and responding to their students' views to improve teaching and learning. Schools would certainly benefit from localising the meaning of student voice and even question any mismatch between rhetoric and practice.

A set of adapted questions provides an initial starting point for teachers to reflect on student voice development (Holmes, 2009a, 2009b):

1. Do we have a shared definition of what student voice means in our school?
2. How might we overcome our gaps in knowledge, skills and understanding about student voice?
3. Do we have clarity about the potential benefits of student voice? Can we explain how student voice helps students to develop:
   a. Reflective thinking;
   b. Positive self-esteem;
   c. Social competencies; and
   d. Improve personal standards of achievement?
4. Do we know why we are asking students for their views and who benefits?
5. What are we seeking from students' views?

Are we mindful that students will:
a. Tire of requests to share views on matters that do not have any personal significance;
b. Not respond to restrictive or patronising language; and
c. Detect a lack of credibility if they seldom see action as a result of sharing their views.
6. Do we know what constitutes participation and consultation with:
a. The individual student; groups of students; and in the student-teacher relationship?
7. What do we expect from our students in terms of participation and consultation on a school wide level?
8. If we are engaging student voice, are there students who are being listened to more often than others? How do we know it is making a difference in the school?
9. Are we honest about:
   a. What students reveal to us?
   b. Using students' ideas to inform or change our classroom practice?
   c. Sustaining changes and a commitment to student voice over time?
10. Do teachers have a voice in the school? Do we need to address teacher voice before student voice?

The following three adapted starting points for review may be useful for schools when thinking about student voice activities (Macbeath et al., 2003):

School wide review
Articulating Vision or Curriculum development;
Exploring school rules or peer relationships;
Improving buildings and property; and
Defining the 'good' school.
Year group review
Planning peer induction;
Defining the 'good' peer leader or representative; and
Defining student roles and responsibilities.
Classroom review
Defining the 'good' teacher;
Defining the 'good' learner;
Identifying what helps and hinders learning;
Explaining what and how feedback helps;
Suggesting ways to begin and close lessons;
Suggesting what to reduce or have more of in a lesson; and
Critiquing the impacts of peer grouping and seating arrangements.

Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation in its entirety (1992) may be adapted or used as a model of student voice participation when reflecting on classroom practice, school events or student leadership (Diagram 1). The model may be used to measure current levels of student participation and empowerment. Additionally, it may
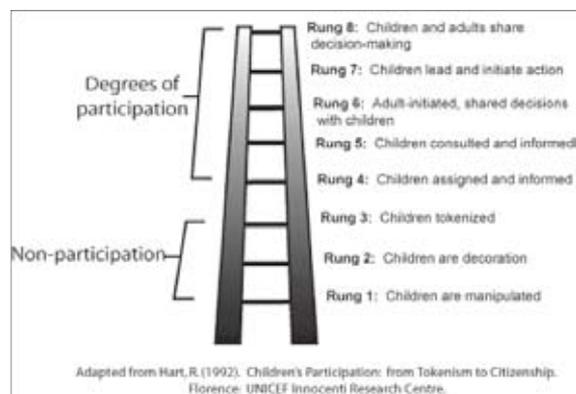
be used to identify any future position of student voice activities. The ladder of participation is not applied sequentially or incrementally. Application will depend on the student voice activity.

Consider how:

- Each rung represents increased student empowerment and shared adult/student responsibility;
- The bottom three rungs are more adult led activities and the top five rungs move towards more student led activity; and
- The different rungs might represent different student voice activities.

Diagram 1: Ladder of Participation

Rung 8: Children and adults share decision-making

Rung 7: Children lead and initiate action

Rung 6: Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children

Rung 5: Children consulted and informed

Rung 4: Children assigned and informed

Rung 3: Children tokenized

Rung 2: Children are decoration

Rung 1: Children are manipulated

Degrees of participation

Non-participation

Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

Conclusion: A foundation for learning

Research highlights that student voice repositions students as essential partners with teachers in the process of improving classroom learning and teacher practice. Engaging the views and actions of young people are a key principle of student voice. Respectful and trusting student and teacher relationships lay the foundation for credible student voice development. Student voice goes beyond just listening to students' views; it involves teachers reflecting on the implications of those views in the class setting. Student voice includes students talking with teachers about their learning. Students, who learn to articulate their views and learning goals, experience a sense of empowerment as connectedness grows within the classroom. Cook-Sather (2006) asserts that: young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education (p. 359).

Student voice is not about teachers abdicating their responsibility for teaching children the school curriculum. Neither is student voice about students making all the decisions about school curriculum. Similarly explained in a curriculum update, is the call for renewed foundations between the student and teacher (Ministry of Education, 2010):

Putting students at the centre does not mean that decisions about the curriculum are handed over to them. But it should mean that students are involved in curriculum decision making, and participate in or help to lead actions, in a partnership led by the professionals. Being actively involved in their education helps students to take responsibility for their learning and to grow as independent and resourceful individuals (p. 4).

Learning conversations should continue to help teachers think critically about lesson "switch-ons" and "switch-offs". Learning conversations should continue to help students to become more reflective and analytical about their learning. Listening to students' views about teaching, learning and schooling enables teachers to see the students' world from their perspective. Student voice reveals how these world views can vary greatly. Our challenge as teachers is perhaps taking a more critical stance to see what is so familiar - differently.

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Books Worth Reading

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