Educational Review
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713415680

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Online Publication Date: 01 May 2006

To cite this Article Rudduck, Jean and Fielding, Michael(2006)'Student voice and the perils of popularity',Educational Review,58:2,219 — 231
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/00131910600584207
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131910600584207

Educational Review
Vol. 58, No. 2, May 2006, pp. 219–231

Student voice and the perils of popularity

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In this article we suggest that the current popularity of student voice can lead to surface compliance—to a quick response that focuses on 'how to do it' rather than a reflective review of 'why we might want to do it'. We look at the links between student consultation and participation and the legacy of the progressive democratic tradition in our schools and we look also at the difference between teaching about democracy as an investment for the future and enacting democratic principles in the daily life of the school (a commitment to the present). The tension between institutional gains (the school improvement perspective) and personal gains (confidence, a view point and the shaping of identity) is discussed and three of the 'big issues' are identified that underlie the credible development of student voice: power relations between teachers and students, the commitment to authenticity, and the principle of inclusiveness. Finally we reflect on some of the organizational implications of developing student voice: finding time and building a whole-school culture in which student voice has a place.

Introduction

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)/Teaching and Learning Research Programme's (TLRP's) Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning Project—which was the starting point for this Special Issue—ended its research and development phase in 2003. Since then interest in student voice, in consultation and participation, has grown rapidly. More and more organizations have become involved and their impulse is often to prepare their own 'how to do it' materials on student voice for their own constituency of practitioners, both within and beyond the school sector. But there are some dangers in rapid popularization and schools interested in introducing student voice should, we think, ask themselves:

- whether the climate is appropriate in terms of trust and openness and if not how it can be made more so;

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ISSN 0013-1911 (print)/ISSN 1465-3397 (online)/06/020219-13

DOI: 10.1080/00131910600584207

- why they want to introduce and/or develop student voice;
- who might feel (or what might be) most at risk as a result of introducing student voice;
- what can be learned from accounts of its development in other settings.

The Consulting Pupils Project offers a lot (through its publications and its continuing 'live' contributions to professional development courses) that can help teachers with these questions but

- its remit ensured that it did not stray far outside the school sector to look at parallel developments beyond school (hence the importance of Mike Wyness's and Julia Flutter's papers in this Special Issue);
- it did not have the resources to look at the implications of student voice for new teachers (hence the importance of Fotini Mitsoni's paper in this Special Issue);
- it reflected the prevailing concern with student voice and school improvement and while it documented other outcomes to do with students' confidence, self esteem and sense of agency, it did not give as much attention to the shaping of student identity (hence the importance of John MacBeath's paper in this Special Issue);
- the team did not have time until the Project was 'over' to stand back and reflect more theoretically on the data (hence the importance of the papers by Donald McIntyre and David Pedder and by Diane Reay in this Special Issue).

What we try to do in this final paper is to highlight the things that we think are important but that often get side-lined as a result of the urgent pressure to implement new ideas quickly. The topics we focus on are these:

- interesting antecedents: consultation, participation and the democratic tradition in schools;
- the contribution that student voice can make to the development of students' identities and to the skills of confident discussion and negotiation—what Stewart Ranson calls the foundation for 'active capability' (Ranson, 2000, p. 265);
- some of the fundamental issues that underlie the development of student voice, including the challenge to traditional power relations, the importance of authenticity and the need to be alert to issues of inclusion and exclusion.

Interesting antecedents: consultation, participation and the democratic tradition

We think it important to give some attention to the historical resonance of new initiatives so that we can understand their 'rootedness' in earlier thinking and practice. In this section, therefore, we look back.

The editorial started (at the beginning of this Special Issue) by pointing out that student voice was not a new topic for *Educational Review* which had devoted a whole

issue to it in 1978. The papers in that issue were based on data gathered by researchers interested in students' perspectives but did not reflect, as far as we can tell, any special commitment on the part of the schools they worked in to promoting student voice. However there were many high profile schools (and there may have been others that were not written about) where it had flourished. These were mainly independent schools but there are also accounts from some well known progressive state schools. The principles on which the schools were developed led to a culture in which students as an institutional group had considerable influence and status. There was more to this than recognizing that students might have things to say about improving their experiences in school; there was a more rounded appreciation of young people's capabilities and a recognition of the importance of their personal and social development.

We shall look briefly at three schools where the commitment to participation and voice was central. One was established in the 1890s, one in the 1920s and the third in the 1940s. The first school was founded by John Haden Badley, the second by Harold Dent, and the third by Alex Bloom. What the schools appear to have in common was a founding headteacher who was passionately committed to democratic possibilities—to the idea of the school as a community where students shared in its governance, to student autonomy and, importantly, to making spaces where students could develop their own identities and interests.

Bedales[1] was an independent boarding school (originally for boys but becoming co-educational after a few years). Its founding philosophy emphasized 'freedom, trust, responsibility'. Students had a role in the organization of the school, participated in the monitoring of their own progress, and had some choice in learning activities. The school's founder wanted a 'true community' of students rather than 'a herd' and thought it important that 'members feel that they have a share in its government and the organization of its life'. The school parliament, which was an advisory rather than a legislative body, was set up so that 'Staff and the School might understand each other's point of view and learn the reasons why any particular measure is necessary or where it would press hardly'. A recent school brochure refers to the continuing vitality of the original 'Bedales vision' which highlighted 'tolerance, breadth in curriculum and a focus on the whole person'.

Harold Dent[2] was better known as historian and editor of the *Times Educational Supplement* (TES) than as a headteacher but in the late 1920s he was appointed as 'the first headmaster of a new type of secondary school, a school which was to cater for the more practical and less academically minded type of boy who was nevertheless possessed of good ability' (Dent, 1939, pp. 390–391; in Rudduck, 1999). Patricia Rowan, a later editor of the TES, comments: 'He wanted to make children participants in their own schooling, rather than just recipient; he wanted, 'to free them from sitting like little models' (Rowan, 1997, p. 9). Dent believed that young people had 'a personal interest in their upbringing, something to contribute to its problems, and a point of view that we (should) treat with greater deference' (1939, p. 390). One of his most innovative moves was fired by his belief that young people had to be given space to make decisions and to work out and develop their

own identities and he had sufficient freedom in curriculum planning to be able to act on his concerns:

> I might fit the boys into a prearranged curriculum which could later be modified in detail to suit particular needs, or I might devise some means whereby the boys themselves could indicate to me what sort of curriculum would be best for their development.

He opted for the latter and allowed the 12–13 year old students a term in which they were able to choose and work on their own extended projects: 'Many … were utterly different creatures by the end of the term; they had developed poise, self-confidence and skill, and there was little difficulty in fitting them into courses which were calculated to give them present satisfaction and a sure basis for the future' (Dent, 1939, p. 392). He attributed these outcomes to the opportunity for young people to exercise choice in a framework of responsibility and trust.

St George-in-the-East, a state secondary school, was established by Alexander Bloom[3] in London in 1945. What was particularly distinctive of Bloom's work, especially in contrast to today's icons of excellence, was, firstly, his very clear view of how human beings grow and flourish as persons; secondly, his commitment to an education based on these beliefs; and, thirdly, his capacity to develop his aspirations in the realities of everyday encounters.

Bloom's approach rested on the expectation that everyone in the school would feel committed to the community which they were part of and want to contribute to its wellbeing. Bloom saw the principle of communally situated individuality as central to a democratic way of life. Furthermore, he took the view that 'a consciously democratic community could not be formed gradually by the removal of one taboo after another' and as a consequence, his school began 'without regimentation, without corporal punishment, without competition' (Bloom, 1948, p. 121). For Bloom, 'fear of authority … , fear of failure, … and the fear of punishment' had to be replaced by 'friendship, security and the recognition of each child's worth' (Bloom, 1952, pp. 135–136).

The confidence that these alternative arrangements encouraged was seminal. Bloom recognized the importance of young people making choices, through a negotiated curriculum, about what, how, when and with whom they learned. The structures for participation at St George-in-the-East were nested within a whole school forum that included all students (about 260) and all staff (about 10). The overall arrangements included a Teacher Panel and a Student Panel (which met every week, the Student Panel having the power to set up student committees to manage particular tasks or ventures), a Joint Panel which met every month and a whole School Council which met a few days after the Joint Panel. Every member of the school was entitled to be present at and contribute to the School Council. In many ways the most remarkable feature of this very remarkable school was the centrality of what we would now call 'student voice' in its daily life and its intellectual and practical enquiry.

Common to these three schools was a commitment to the idea of community as something that can support the development of individual identities, personal

autonomy and choice while at the same time highlighting the importance of mutual respect, trust and reciprocity. The schools, in their different ways, all created spaces where students could explore and express their views, both as individuals and as representatives of the student group.

Today, government support for student voice and participation in schools is strong but seems to have been fuelled by concerns other than the making of democratic communities. Familiarity with the principles of democratic governance is considered important but presented as something to be taught rather than experienced in the daily life of the school. Interestingly, Harold Dent had argued, way back in 1930, for experiencing democracy as a defining feature of school culture: 'Before you can have an educated democracy you must offer your democracy an education that is likely to make it one' (Dent, 1930, p. 14).

Again, official guidelines suggest that democracy in education is primarily about preparing students for their role as future citizens—and yet what matters to students is their lives in school now. As Anne Oakley (1994) has said, we are often pre-occupied with young people's 'becoming', 'with their status as ''would-be'' adults—rather than with the here and now state of ''being'''. Consultation and participation are an enactment, in the present, of democratic principles and are powerful allies in the task of redefining the status of young people in schools and shaping more democratic structures for learning.

The contribution of student voice to the development of cooperative agency and individual identity

School improvement is probably the dominant justification for consultation and participation in the present performance-dominated climate. However, Stewart Ranson offers a persuasive argument that links the idea of the school as a democratic community, the confidence that young people can develop in such a setting and their agency in helping improve the conditions of learning (see also Rudduck & Flutter, 2004, pp. 133–134). He talks about voice in the context of the 'remaking of communities', both within and beyond school, suggesting that what voice offers is the opportunity for young people to discover and affirm personal perspective and also to learn to cooperate and to negotiate. It is important, he continues, that young people 'learn how to enter into a dialogue with others in order to transform practice' (Ranson, 2000, p. 266). However, while acknowledging that the government is actively promoting student involvement he remains uncertain how much it is really valued compared with other contemporary concerns and initiatives:

> While much public policy focuses upon the skills young people will need to enter and survive in the labour market, less emphasis is accorded to the significance of encouraging them to find the voice and practices of cooperative agency indispensable to flourishing within a democratic civil society. (Ranson, 2000, p. 263)

Government needs to reflect on the contradictions and inconsistencies in its presentation of student participation and voice: on the one hand, the virtues of consultation and participation are endorsed while on the other hand, systems are

sustained which reflect the very different values of what Ahier *et al.* (2003) refer to as 'competitive individualism'—where students are 'categorized, compared to and judged against one another' (Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001, pp. 3–4). For many teachers the tension is captured by the still relevant words of Bastian and colleagues (1985, p. 1): they feel caught at some level between 'a desire … to serve the competitive demands of a stratified society, and a desire … to play a socially integrative and democratic role, serving the right of all children to develop to their fullest potential'.

Being able to 'have a say' on things that matter to you is important but the implications of 'finding a voice' are greater; they engage with issues of personal identity. Some students are aware of the difficulty of finding your own voice within the traditional organization of large schools. Hart *et al.* (2004) have pointed out that 'classroom environments are … by their very nature, places where individual affirmation is not all that easily come by' (p. 27) and they recall Philip Jackson's (1968) observation that students have to learn to live 'as part of a crowd'. The importance to students of developing a sense of their own identity is explained by Jessye, a student taking part in the collaborative project coordinated by Shultz and Cook-Sather which was about helping young people 'to express in their own voices their perceptions, feelings and insights about school' (2001, p. xi). Jessye co-authored a chapter called 'Speaking out loud: girls seeking self-hood' and in it she explains how important it is to find out who you are:

> This (report) is not an explanation of who we are, but rather, a sharing of our battle to find that person, and this is about school because 'student' is part of who we are, 'learning' is part of what we do, and school is where who we are and want to be collides with who everyone else is. (It's) where we attempt to learn who we are and begin to understand who we want to be. (Jessye, in Judon *et al.*, 2001, p. 39)

Many students we have talked with wanted to understand the nature of their agency and they want to find their own position on controversial issues rather than feel that their views are constructed out of exam-acceptable voices—as this young American woman explains:

> I have seen too many people trapped by listening to the voices in their heads that are not their own, reaching the miserable point when their own voices are lost for good amongst all the jumble. (Julia, in Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001, p. xi)

Other students talk powerfully about similar experiences, feeling that their voices are ignored or even suppressed in school and about how difficult it is to learn to think for themselves. MacBeath and Weir (1991) home in on 'the powerful influence of external examinations in motivating students to ''reproduce'' learning rather than develop their own thinking'. But a 15 year old from an English school makes a different point, attributing the difficulty of finding one's own voice less to the pressure to reproduce 'safe' answers for the exam than to the pressure of having one's ideas shaped by the strong expectations of others:

> When I was younger I was quite ambivalent about God. I didn't care about religion either way. Now religion is put on us in such a forceful way that we violently disbelieve

> out of spite … We should not be told what to believe. Our opinion is never asked for and never matters. (quoted in Rudduck & Flutter, 2004, p. 102)

The big issues: power relations, authenticity and inclusion

The glossy popularity of student voice can make consultation seem easy—it is not. Students often comment on the lack of occasions—reflecting, perhaps, a lack of expectation on the part of school managers—when they can discuss their experiences. An American student describes the frustration:

> Sometimes I wish I could sit down with one of my teachers and just tell them what I exactly think about their class. It might be good, it might be bad, it's just that you don't have the opportunity to do it. (Anub, in Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001, p. xii)

The concern that springs most nimbly to teachers' minds is also finding (rather than making) time and space in the curriculum. But a more fundamental concern is about rupturing the security of traditional power relations between teachers and students and redefining the boundaries of possibility.

Power relations

> (Work on voice) starts from the position that interesting things can be said by groups who do not occupy the … high ground—they may actually be quite lowly and situated at some distance from the centres of power. (Smyth & Hattam, 2002, p. 378)

The development of student participation in schools depends on teachers being prepared to 'see' young people differently. A teacher involved in a project on student participation offers his analysis of the problem of change: he comments on the improvement strategies that the management team in his school are comfortable with and the more fundamental change that, in his view, is actually needed:

> The management puts more systems in place, they rejuvenate old ones but there is nothing wrong with the systems that we already have. It is our perception of the students, that's what we've got to change. (quoted in Finney, 2005, p. 71)

Gerald Grace (1995) has talked about the 'ideology of immaturity' that gets in the way of our seeing students as responsible and capable young people and Mike Wyness (2000, p. 1) reminds us that 'in many contexts and for a variety of reasons, the child as a subordinate subject is a compelling conception'. Student voice initiatives require that we review our notions of childhood.

A more immediate constraint on action is uncertainty about what's acceptable in consultation. Young people may feel that they have a lot to contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning but they are uncertain how to proceed and tend to remain silent—unless a visiting researcher provides a one-off outlet for comment. The idea of students and teachers discussing their work together can generate a lot of anxiety: at first teachers are likely to be anxious about what students might say about them. Our experience, however, is that in most settings young people are serious, courteous and constructive in their commentaries on teaching

and learning; harsh criticism of school regimes tends only to be triggered by perceptions of the invidiously different ways that different groups are treated, valued and privileged but if schools are to improve, this is the kind of uncomfortable self-knowledge that they need to confront (see McIntyre *et al.*, 2005). Students can also be anxious: younger students are concerned because commenting on what teachers do is seen as 'rude' or 'wrong'; older students, however, are more inclined to be anxious because they fear retaliation:

> They might get offended, because it's not nice if you say, like, 'Our lesson is rubbish'—they'll get upset about it.
>
> I don't want to get detention, and I think he'd feel like, 'If you can't say anything nice then get out of my class'.
>
> It's better to write it down than to tell her because then she can't shout. (quoted in Rudduck, 2006)

Anxiety is an understandable response to novel situations and teachers' anxiety can be allayed by hearing accounts from colleagues who have tried giving students a voice, who have survived the experience and become excited by the possibilities it opens up—or by hearing students from their own school discussing ways of improving learning or presenting the outcomes of their students-as-researcher enquiries:

> Staff that you thought wouldn't ever listen who'd say, 'Fine, yes, but that's not for me'—once they see the students reacting and hear what they're saying—and they may be saying in a lesson, 'Well would you mind if I did that a slightly different way, would that be all right?'—they're suddenly thinking, 'Well, maybe they *do* know what they're talking about'. (Mulliss, 2002, p. 2)

There is, in the present climate, some security in the idea of moving towards familiar goals in familiar ways, but many teachers, impatient with what Frowe (2001) calls 'the commodification of education', and its modernizing vocabulary of 'delivery', 'consumers', 'markets', and 'output characteristics', seem ready to trade in the quieter life for more risk and excitement and a better deal for their students. However, in most schools it will take time and patient commitment to build open and dependable structures which will enable students and teachers, as partners, and without embarrassment, to talk about what gets in the way of progress in particular classes.

Authenticity

Authenticity is about ensuring that the process of consultation and participation seems credible to students (teachers also need to be confident that students feel able to say what they want to say). From the student perspective, authenticity rests on three things: whether they have been involved in determining the focus of consultation; whether the interest of adults in what they have to say is real or contrived; and whether there is discussion of their suggestions and active follow-through.

In relation to the first, we believe it important to check out whether the topics 'permitted' for discussion in schools are ones that students see as significant and whether the discussions are occasions for genuine dialogue in which students can speak without fear of retaliation. Initiatives that seek student opinion on matters identified, framed and articulated solely by researchers or teachers, or that invite comment on issues that students see as important and that do not lead to action or discussion of possible courses of action are unlikely to be seen as credible. Students will soon tire of invitations (a) to express a view on matters they do not think are important, (b) are framed in a language they find restrictive, alienating or patronizing, and (c) that seldom result in actions or dialogue that affects the quality of their lives (see Fielding, 2004, pp. 306–307). And as Fielding and Prieto have said, using a powerful and memorable image, 'We … regard it as crucial for student perceptions and recommendations to be responded to, not merely treated as minor footnotes in an unaltered adult text' (2002, p. 20).

Authenticity, then, is the disciplined communication of genuine interest in what students think and have to say: it's about learning to listen, to offer feedback, to discuss what lines of action there are, to explain why certain responses are not possible. It often involves a readiness to be surprised by students' insights and capabilities and not dismissive of their thinking. Roger Holdsworth suggests that we have traditionally relegated young people 'to a less significant realm than those who have reached ''adult'' life' and that by doing so we obscure both the richness of their experience and their capacity to do more than schools routinely expect and allow (2001, p. 2). And Hall and Martello (1996, p. 72) argue that adults cannot and don't 'know better than kids' how kids think and feel about school and that 'too often the assumption is made that children are unable to articulate the complex meta-cognitive that goes on inside their own minds'.

There is a risk that in putting so much emphasis on students we forget the pivotal role of the teacher in managing change—and some have told us that before they can focus wholeheartedly on student consultation in their school, they need to feel that *they* have a voice in the review and formulation of policy—that *they* matter.

Inclusion

In the context of student voice the issue of language is complex—and potentially divisive. According to Gerald Grace, 'discourses are about what can be said and thought but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority' (1995, p. 26); they carry implicit messages about membership. In developing consultation, we need to monitor whose voices are heard in the acoustic of the school—and students can often tell us: 'I think they listen to some people, like the good ones', and again, 'If you're doing well they listen'. The problem is that consultation assumes a degree of social confidence and of linguistic competence that not all students have, or feel that they have, as Shirley Brice Heath is well aware:

> For many young people who have not participated extensively at home or at school in open discussions or small group conversations, … and as planners and thinking

> partners, their facility with certain language structures lies dormant. (Brice Heath, 2004, p. 53)

The more self-assured and articulate students may dominate consultative conversations and be more readily 'heard' by teachers but it is the silent—or silenced—students who find learning in school uncongenial whom we also want to hear from so that we can understand why some disengage and what would help them get back on track. Elena Silva (2001, p. 98) urges us to think about 'which students are representing the ''student voice'' of their school'. And in the context of reform, she asks whether those students who are 'best-served by the current setup of their school' can represent the interests of those students 'who are least-served'.

The important point here is that consultation processes can sometimes sustain habits of mind that lead to some students being valued above others. As Ranson has said 'the idea of inclusive citizenship requires recognition of different voices as well as fair distribution of resources which provide the condition for equal participation' (2000, p. 265).

Surviving in an innovation-rich environment

Over the last few years some new terms have become more commonplace in the language of change, such as 'innovation overload' and 'innovation fatigue'. Indeed, some teachers and teacher educators have said that they would be relieved if policy-makers and other agencies would stop producing and promoting 'initiatives' that they feel obliged to do something about. Many, they know, are important, such as raising boys' achievement, learning to learn, assessment for learning, obesity and health awareness, student voice, personalized learning, sustaining engagement post-transfer; the dilemma is how to do justice to these issues while at the same time ensuring that students are actively engaged in school and making good academic progress.

Among these potentially competing initiatives, student voice has a lot going for it in that it is a dimension of some other high profile initiatives and it is relatively easy to see how they could work together in mutually re-enforcing ways. For instance, the Assessment for Learning Reform Group advocates student involvement in assessment practices, and student voice has been presented as one of the nine 'gateways' to personalized learning; it is also fundamental to the realization of citizenship education in the here and now community of the school. So, student voice is currently popular but one of the perils of popularity is surface compliance. Schools may well feel obliged to be seen to be 'doing it'—taking it on board without having the time to think through why they want to do it, how it fits with other initiatives within the institution's development plan and scheme of values, and what the personal and institutional risks are.

We also have to recognize that in developing student voice we may be out of step with powerful contemporary concerns that limit the possibilities for change by defining student achievement narrowly. In one school we worked in the teachers, although committed to student voice, felt that it would take time away from coverage

of the curriculum and that this would compromise their performance in the league tables; their strategy was to regard consultation as an end of term treat. Ben Levin, researcher and policy-maker from Canada, says that when we hear what students identify as the main elements of schooling—'memorization and passing tests'—we realize that 'we have failed to communicate our broader goals and aspirations for schooling in ways that enable young people to understand what learning is for and how it is ''for them''' (2000).

So, although the idea of student consultation and participation is supported by policy-makers and has a place among the criteria that inspectors use in judging a good school it is not mandatory and 'fitting it in' is a problem. Another problem is that there has been as yet no formal expectation that teachers in training should be introduced to its strategies and rationales. An important concern for the longer term survival of student voice is building a coherent and secure school-wide foundation for the work. While there are often patches of exciting work on student voice, it can be difficult to move from these islands of risky commitment to the mainland of the school and create a 'productive community' that is characterized by 'citizenship as practice' (Biesta & Lawy, 2006, p. 72).

But perhaps the most challenging long-term issue for all of us is the one raised by Stewart Ranson when he asks whether encouraging young people to find a voice and to learn the practices of cooperative agency is fundamental to the revitalization of our schools as learning communities within a democratic society. Are we creating a new order of experience for students in schools, new roles for teachers and students—or will the idea of consulting students prove to be little more than a passing fashion, a tokenistic nod in the direction of consumerism?

Notes

1. This passage is based on Caroline Lanskey's work for the ESRC/TLRP Project, Consulting Students about Teaching and Learning (see Lanskey in Rudduck & Flutter, 2004).
2. This passages is based on the second memorial lecture for Harold Dent given by Jean Rudduck in 1998 and printed in 1999.
3. The passage on Alexander Bloom draws substantially on Michael Fielding (2005).
4. The 1998 Report of the Government's Advisory Group, known as the Crick Report, argued strongly that democracy should be included in the curriculum but was strategically somewhat ambivalent about the balance between the principles being taught about and actually being enacted:

> We unanimously advise the Secretary of State that citizenship and *the teaching of* democracy … is so important both for schools and the life of the nation that there must be a statutory requirement for schools to ensure that it is part of the entitlement of all students. (Crick, 1998, p. 7; emphasis added)

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