

Student voice in education

Sara Bragg

Abstract: A diverse and contested range of practices referred to as ‘student voice’ have long flourished in many educational contexts, and are regularly re-discovered by new generations of teachers. Currently the fortunes of student voice in England may appear to be waning, particularly compared to their waxing elsewhere and under the 1997-2010 New Labour government. This article argues that even evidencing the value of student voice (whether in instrumental, pragmatic, intrinsic, moral, or democratic terms) is unlikely to convince those who discredit it. Instead, we should change the conversation about voice to go beyond the liberal and individualistic rights-based model underpinning many accounts: we need to develop more nuanced understandings of social contexts, power, the school as an institution, and of voice as a practice rather than the property of an individuated subject. Paying greater attention to the ‘vital relationality’ between subjects, infrastructures, the material and the affective, can help us understand the differences that matter in student voice. We may thereby build socialities that ‘stay with the trouble’ of voice, listen in ways that open us to the other, and create more liveable schools.

Keywords: Student/pupil voice, school, children’s rights, enactment, social practice, relationality.

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Introduction

The voice of the child in education has long been a point of controversy. In 2010, for example, a blog post was published¹ that described student voice as ‘frightening and repulsive’, ‘knuckle-headed’, ‘moronic’, ‘a revolting inversion of natural roles and hierarchy’ that would ‘suck the blood of professionalism from our sector like vampires ... infect and rot school management decisions’. It was figured as a form of violent subjection, of doing-to, about judgement (critiquing teacher’s performance), gaining power in a zero-sum game (‘to tell us how to teach, what to teach, whom to hire, what to have on the curriculum, what a school should be built like’). Teachers ‘know more’, including for the author’s part ‘most of what [students are] going to say’, while students lack ‘experience, impartiality and wisdom’ or ‘a rational, unbiased opinion that could possibly be of credible interrogative ability’, since they are ‘instinctive egoists’, ‘intrinsically poor judges’ seeking ‘immediate gratification’. Perhaps students can report abusive behaviour, the blogger muses, but even that should properly be via their parents. Although the vocabulary was perhaps self-consciously iconoclastic, the accompanying image, a mocked-up gum packet bearing the capitalised words ‘how about a nice big pack of shut the hell up’, underscored its attacking tone.

Fast forward to the present and its author, Tom Bennett, has been described as one of the most influential figures in education, the government’s adviser on its ‘behaviour hubs’ and the founder of the ‘astro-turfed’ reform movement ResearchED (Watson 2020). He joins a procession of education ministers and others telling teachers how and what to teach (by ‘authoritatively impart[ing] knowledge’ to children sitting in rows and ability groups; not anti-capitalism or critical race theory).² It therefore appears that student voice is falling out of favour, at least within governing circles in this neoconservative moment and in comparison to the 1997-2010 New Labour era of the *Children Act* (2004), *Working Together: giving children and young people a say* (2004), *Every Child Matters* (2003) and the *Creative Partnerships* schools initiative.³

However, our heterogeneous education systems simultaneously allow diversity. The Welsh government is currently developing a new curriculum in which ‘meaningful and purposeful pupil participation’ is intended to be a strong feature; child-centredness figures crucially in its plans for Relationships and Sexuality Education (Renold & McGeeney 2017); and its schools inspectorate Estyn published *Pupil Participation a best practice guide* in 2016. National and international NGOs, social enterprises,

¹ Bennett (2010).

² Ofsted (2014), Busby (2020) and Trilling (2020).

³ For an account of Creative Partnerships, see Parker (2013).

membership organisations and charities continue to devote significant resources to voice (a.k.a. participation, partnership, consultation, leadership, democracy, capacity-building, co-design and so on) in schools, and to provide accreditations, kitemarks and training aimed at service providers and youth.⁴ *Connect*, an Australian-based global journal of student participation, has now reached its 42nd year of publication.⁵ And students on ‘climate strike’, organising against exclusions, or protesting recently at Pimlico Academy in London, have been vocal, well organised and effective, a point to which we will return.⁶

The story of student voice then is never linear or singular. But where to next? In terms of the British Academy’s Childhood Policy programme,⁷ the anti-voice position represented by Bennett relies for its case on the child as ‘becoming’ and adult-child binaries: children are incompetent, partially-formed, lacking the reason, knowledge and broader perspective that are assumed to be the features of ‘full’ adulthood (or of ‘grown ups’, the curiously childish term he also uses). They therefore need to be *done to*, in precisely the way he fears student voice would ‘do’ to teachers. His disdainful descriptions be-littling children as ‘propped up on pillows’, ‘popping up in arenas that [were] the preserve of the over-five-foot club’, ‘oleaginous’, ‘beardless’ carry discriminatory and ableist undertones made explicit when he compares student voice to asking ‘Ray Charles if my socks match’.

It is tempting to respond to a deficit model with a lack-refuting plenitude, as so many have done. To point to well-documented instances of children’s agency (including in social and political protest), their productive roles, skills, commitment, contributions and insights. To show the instrumental, pragmatic worth and benefits of student voice, the more meaningful learning, egalitarian classroom relationships, and enhanced performance gained by engaging students as equal partners, along with reassurances of students’ respect and generosity to their teachers. We can make a moral case for the intrinsic value of student voice, we can note its democratic import as a mark of equality and respect, not least by referencing, of course, the child’s UNCRC-accorded right to express views. We can emphasise the joy many educators derive from voice processes. We could even observe that the purview of student voice is not total: while students may contribute on all the issues the blog lists – from extra-curricular activities, to curriculum matters (e.g. relationships and sexuality

⁴See e.g. School Councils UK (<https://studentvoice.co.uk>), Phoenix Trust (<https://www.phoenixeducation.co.uk/index.php>), Freedom to Learn (<https://freedomtolearn.uk/>), Bernard Van Leer / Participation Works.

⁵Connect is archived at <https://research.acer.edu.au/connect/>

⁶For Pimlico Academy students’ statement, see <https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmQtstSXu815MdeDB4p3eKQKMy6BaXgz8pUPo64KrmrUQK>, and the campaign group No More Exclusions <https://nomoreexclusions.com/>

⁷<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/childhood/>

education), timing and pace of lessons, methods of learning, staff recruitment, playground or toilets design and rules, food menus, uniform, teacher feedback – they always do so in dialogue with adults and each other.

Such positive examples help to explain why voice practices in education are so often (re)discovered by new generations of educators as a way to revive and rejuvenate their educational practice in ways that they – and young people – find inspiring. And such luminaries of education research as Donald MacIntyre and Jean Rudduck (e.g. Rudduck & MacIntyre 2007) and Michael Fielding (e.g. 2001) have over many years rigorously researched the potential pitfalls, advantages and multiple meanings and manifestations of student voice while still arguing for its value. However, advocates of ‘voice’ may make little headway against those predisposed to discredit them, not least because they speak to different world views. If we simply claim for the child the qualities of autonomy, agency, reason and knowledge that others see as properly only adult, we leave the categories and binaries themselves untouched.

Instead, perhaps we should change the conversation about student voice. To do so we might provide more historical contextualisation of both the evolution of children’s rights, and the school as an institution. We might resist assuming the inherent superiority of ‘student voice’ as its advocates sometimes do, acknowledge that the term can be deployed without critical analysis of its content or of the processes and practices it involves, and attempt to offer just that instead. We might rethink the ontologies that underpin the being-becoming stalemate, in ways that help us develop new ways of listening.

Recontextualising voice

First let us remind ourselves of some broader shifts in understandings of childhood, youth and citizenship. The commercial world has often been accused of ‘commodifying’ childhood. However, many scholars have shown that it has done so by taking children’s desires, interests and perspectives seriously and legitimating the authority of their ‘voice’. Thus consumerism through the 20th century has helped shape our image of the agentic child and even contributed to the global proliferation of child rights discourses (Cook 2000; Buckingham 2011). Moreover the ubiquity of surveys, opinion polls, focus groups and interviews – techniques of the social sciences, market research, media, political life – means that modern citizenship is now at least partly constituted through the expectation and capacity to be ‘consulted’, to have and express opinions. We can of course debate whether the school should or could be untouched by such socio-cultural changes. What is harder to understand is why any young person would respond positively to being addressed by the school as an incompetent ‘becoming’, when more affirming options are available elsewhere.

Ian Hunter's history of the mass education system (1994) positions schooling as hybrid, improvised and assembled from available moral and governmental technologies for turning populations into national citizens. The school adapted and amalgamated on the one hand bureaucratic governance, with its concern for population and the worldly welfare of citizens, and on the other, the subject-forming techniques of Christian conscience-forming through the confessional, with its arts of self-examination and care of individual souls. An interest in monitoring the child's soul was apparent back in the 19th century, when the earliest educational pioneers were already inviting teachers to attend to the 'playground' and the child's inner life, not just the schoolroom and learned content.

Hunter's account of the school is helpful in providing a longer time frame for what are sometimes seen as the concerns only of (1960s) progressive education or critical pedagogy. It also enables a re-reading of different school practices. Take a school that follows a 'tough love', 'no excuses' or 'zero tolerance' approach, in which corridors must be silent, bodies in classrooms sit up straight, eyes 'track the speaker', questions and answers be delivered in 'full sentences' 'standard English', 'like a scholar', detentions are issued for incorrect equipment and uniform (Cushing 2021; Duobly 2017). Compare this to another, which practises 'radical collegiality' with students who are seen as 'experts in their own lives', training them in how to research through surveys and interviews what their peers think makes a good lesson, teacher and student and how to present findings to staff meetings (Fielding 1999).

Both sets of practices 'problematise' students: that is, they make their behaviour, bodies and dispositions into objects of reflection, ethical concern and attention. Both make claims to moral purpose, social mobility and liberation through education. If we notice shades of Old versus New Testament in these differently redemptive approaches (the wayward subject that needs to be led away from temptation towards the light, versus the holy child that is itself the source of wisdom and grace), that may usefully indicate both the role of Christian pastoral traditions in the school's evolution and their deep historical roots. Both are disciplinary in the sense of developing positive competencies and capacities, albeit within constraints. Of course, they also have very different understandings of the students' family and social backgrounds, degree of maturity, and occupational destinies; they offer various, more or less attractive, identities for students and teachers, and tell different kinds of stories about the nature of the school. And it is these differences that matter and that need to be the focus of debate.

Hunter's work also depicts the school as a plural rather than unitary ethical domain containing diverse actors (support staff, administrators, heads, researchers as well as teachers at different stages of their careers, not to mention students themselves, across classrooms, corridors and playgrounds); shaped too by institutions

beyond such as trade unions, parent associations, external providers of services, curriculum experts and committees, publishers, Exam Boards, regulatory mechanisms, inspection and so on. This helps explain why the landscape of pedagogy looks so diverse, and why student voice can flourish – or indeed, be resisted – in localised areas of practice.

Enacting education through voice

A view of schooling as contingent rather than conspiratorial, and power as always-present, capillary, dispersed and ambivalent in its effects, enables us to ask more nuanced questions. Acknowledging that schools are noisy places, but that only some of what students say becomes codified as ‘voice’, and that young people need training or guidance – as David Archard says, to be ‘taught, facilitated, and supported in their expression’ of views (2020: 9) – moves us away from the idea that voice is simply immanent, expressed or not, heard or ignored. Instead we can think about how it is constructed and what it does rather than what it ‘is’. Student voice practices *enact*, in this perspective: they bring into being, in particular ways, not only students, but also schools, teachers, education.

Let’s pursue the example of the more ‘radical’ form of voice mentioned above, where student researchers are tasked to focus on matters of pedagogy. They are often imagined to be – and indeed are - oriented towards more dialogic, active and experiential learning than didactic and passive teaching approaches. The research techniques they learn and apply are academically rigorous. Their ‘voice’, in sharing their perspectives and commitments along with peer-derived findings, serves to recruit teachers into different practices – to move towards and inhabit an egalitarian vision of education, usually in step with a school leadership team’s pre-existing strategies. So here ‘voice’ enacts particular ideas about learning amongst students and reconfigures teacher professionalism in terms of collaboration and cooperation rather than authoritarianism. And it does this by moral example rather than top-down fiat.

To sharpen how we might analyse or even evaluate what such enactments achieve, we also need to attend to the specific contexts of schools. For instance, consider one common approach to students-as-researchers, in which a cadre of students are selected, elected or volunteer to represent their peers, are given training and support, working alongside adults (teachers, other staff, researchers, etc), to generate findings or project outcomes, which may then be presented to audiences within and beyond the school (peers, parents, teachers, senior leaders, academics, local education authority or Academy Trust representatives, etc.). A culture of marketisation and inter-school competition, in which school leaders may need to promote their school or counter

negative local reputations, helps make such a strategy comprehensible. Meanwhile, in-school factors such as general availability of resources, existing relationships between students (or stratified student subcultures) and between staff and students, the presence or absence of divisive educational practices such as streaming and grouping by ability, as well as the inclusivity of project processes, might all make a difference to whether such initiatives are perceived by other students as merited representation or unfair privilege.

Looking at what voice does, what realities it enacts, also enables us to ask questions about what is occluded or obscured. Liberal interventions present student voice as a different perspective that should be valued, made visible, respectable and empowered, hailed by institutions to represent the progress attained by rights-bearing subjects. ‘Youth voice’ can become a form of capital to be exploited, representing newly emergent forms of knowledge production and nodes of expertise. (Greta Thunberg might be one example of a skilled capacity to exploit ‘youthness’ in pursuit of political and environmental objectives.) But what does this model fail to embrace? Might capacitation and inclusion for some sustain or even produce silence and exclusion for others? Many voice initiatives incite students to value autonomy, self-regulation and responsibility for their own conduct and learning: qualities which may also align with general moral ideals of self-sufficiency and more specifically the self-fashioning, risk-taking, enterprising, self-actualising individuated subjects of neoliberalism (Bragg 2007). It is not easy to designate such processes as either instrumentalist and exploitative or empowering, and the position for which I am arguing does not require us to do so. However, questions remain about whether and how student rights and responsibility for learning might obstruct analysis of structural issues, shade into blaming non-participating individuals for their own failures in ways that make participation an oppressive imposition or a practice that lacks meaning. What is involved – affectively, culturally, socially, economically – in attaining the position of ‘student’ and the privileged institutional recognition that this involves: and might this subject position not be available to all?

None of this suggests that student voice practices are not worthwhile, but that we need to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016) they create, their dilemmas as well as achievements (Mayes 2018). As others have argued, and as we can see in Archard’s (2020) paper, the subject of child rights is often discussed as a universalised and individual subject abstracted from social differences such as race, class, gender, sexuality (Burman 1996). Attending to such differences might produce more textured readings of voice. We can ask about the kinds of orientations different voice practices encourage, how far they are collective or elite, solidaristic or judgmental, how far they disrupt doxa of social disadvantage or teacher failings, what voices are dominant, their affective import (Finneran *et al.* 2021). We can analyse the material, affective and symbolic

resources that underpin young people's capacity for voice, situating the conditions of its possibility, rather than mythologising it as self-generated.

Vital relationalities: new ontologies of (listening to) student voice

The concept of enactment involves a different ontology of the student, away from agency and autonomy. Centring the student in voice would miss what Spyros Spyrou, Rachel Rosen and Dan Cook call the 'vital relationality' of childhood (2018). This wonderfully resonant phrase allows us to think in terms of a relational and interdependent ontology: an understanding that students, teachers, schools etc do not pre-exist and interact, rather that they *intra-act* (Barad 2007) or *become-with*, are entangled and emerge across not only human relations but also in relation to materialities, objects, affects, spaces, infrastructures. This perspective moves us away from Archard's argument about when individual children might become able to 'express' views and be understood in the 'very terms [the child] intended' (2020: 9) because it is not interested in questions of interiority or prior intentionality, and it goes beyond a (methodological and ethical) individualism. Recognising relationality, our social interdependence and reliance on others of all kinds to come into being, can develop a different kind of ethical sociality, in which what Jacques Rancière (2010) terms 'radical equality' is axiomatic.

The neoconservative position that student voice can be dismissed because it is already known in advance, and that only the same – the discourse of trained professionals – is worth listening to, constitutes a suffocating refusal to encounter difference. To listen is an intersubjective act, an engagement in dialogue, opening ourselves to the other. Attuning to childhood and youth – for example to their 'idioms', 'riffing' or humour – opens us to mutually powerful encounters (Nolas *et al.* 2019; Nelson 2017; Webb 2019). Even if those encounters are at times troubling, decentring, disorienting, they engage us in a practice of becoming-with, of creating worlds as Nolas *et al.* (2019) argue, or at least, of creating more liveable and sociable schools that offer room to breathe.

Conclusion: 'post' voice?

In conclusion, and to respond to the themes of the Childhood policy programme, I have argued that to build the voice of the student into policy, we need complex ways of seeing how what comes to be recognised as 'student voice' is enacted, engaging critically with the histories, detail and complexity of specific sites and practices, and

the positions, capacities and narratives it offers. We need to circumvent the being-becoming binary rather than try to place the child more firmly on one side or the other, and I have suggested that thinking in terms of enactment, ‘vital relationalities’ and ‘becoming-with’ might help us acknowledge our ethical, mutually-constituting interconnections. All this might involve a challenge to an individualist and liberal rights-based model. However, we gain solidarity, affinity, and perhaps also new ways of reading the unexpected.

To substantiate this argument, consider the example briefly mentioned above, of Pimlico Academy in London. Students protested in 2021 partly in reaction to a new headteacher who brought in the kind of ‘tough love’ disciplinary approaches described above, alongside other neoconservative measures such as flag flying, new curricula and uniform policies. All of these, as we noted, problematise young people as malleable, incapable and needing authority and direction. The students’ published response⁸ brings into its ambit a wide range of what matters in schools and beyond at the current moment: the hijab, hair, flags, Islamophobia, racism, nationalism, decolonising the curriculum, and the place of creativity in learning. Students spoke back, not from the place (of ‘becoming’) to which they were summoned, but from elsewhere, a place forged by long histories of (youth) activism, anti-racism, and progressive, creative or radical education in the inner city, which had not been completely extinguished even by the privatisation to which their school had been subjected. They show us that there are stories yet to tell about the place of young people’s voices in education, as well as new ways to hear them.

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⁸Pimlico Academy students’ statement (see footnote 6 above).

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