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EDITORIAL

Beyond “Voice”: New roles, relations, and contexts in researching with young people

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The immediate roots of this Special Issue of Discourse lie in a seminar series funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) in England that took place between 2004 and 2006 and involved Manchester Metropolitan, Nottingham and Sussex Universities and the National College for School Leadership. The title of the seminar series, “Engaging Critically with Pupil Voice: Children and young people as partners in school and community change” [RES-451-26-0165] points to one of the key issues that runs through the papers that make up this Special Issue, a concern that the wider context of “New Wave” student voice movements (Fielding, 2004) are subjected to more intellectually demanding and experientially grounded scrutiny than is currently the case. Only then will it help those interested in the field to develop a more critically reflexive praxis that exposes and opposes the incorporation of student voice into the machinery of the status quo. Only then will it offer researchers working with young people new perspectives and new possibilities that both affirm and challenge existing work in a domain that is likely to continue to grow in range and importance in the coming decade in a number of countries across the world.

A Sociology of Pedagogic Voice

One of the threads that weaves its way through the Special Issue is the importance of problematising the notion of “voice”. Madeleine Arnot and Diane Reay’s “A Sociology of Pedagogic Voice: Power, inequality and pupil consultation” puts this elegantly when they remind us that “the egalitarian mythology of voice as a concept provides a valuable legitimating tool for any government keen to shift attention away from increasingly aggravated social inequalities”. This does not, however, lead them to suggest we should abandon the notion of voice altogether. Whilst their interrogation of some critical and post-structuralist voice research underscores the withering critique of Moore and Muller (1999), it leads to their advocacy of the reconceptualisation of voice, not to its demise. Writing within a Bernsteinian tradition, they argue for the importance of “pedagogic voices”, for the distinctiveness
of the pedagogic as a site for human encounter and exchange with its own “acoustic” and its own set of possibilities and denials strongly influenced by framing and classification modalities.

Of the many important contributions Arnot and Reay make in their paper, there are two it is especially appropriate to foreground here. Firstly, in identifying four types of pupil talk—classroom, subject, identity and code—they emphasise the last as particularly pertinent and problematic for those teachers who wish to develop the kind of pupil consultation that engages more than a small number of pupils who fit an idealised, usually middle-class, template. There is, as they eloquently argue, “a danger . . . that the process of pupil consultation is one which hides the social stratification aspects of schooling” and that this is manifest persistently and powerfully in the social inequalities and power relations that characterise pedagogic encounters. It is not, however, a danger that is overwhelming. Their second, companion point is that whilst the notion of pupil voice is complex and “slippery”, within those complexities and ambivalences there are also the beginnings of alternative possibilities: whilst “voice (power) sets limits on the range and potential of messages”, it is also true that “interactional practices shape messages and can change voice and ultimately challenge power relations”. In particular, “a more cautious sense of the power of student voice” emerges from a view that “there are possibilities for working with the ‘yet-to-be-voiced’ which may shift relations of control”.

Students-as-Researchers: Promise and paradox

The two papers that follow explore from slightly different angles a development which, whilst often prone to incorporation and accommodation to the current imperatives of neo-liberal managerialism, nonetheless holds out the possibility of opening up new territory, both as a research methodology and as a substantive structural intervention that positively unsettles the interpersonal, political and professional architecture of the school. Pat Thomson and Helen Gunter’s “The Methodology of Students-as-Researchers: Valuing and using experience and expertise to develop methods” argues for a non-essentialist variant of standpoint theory that not only resists the lure of “authentic” student voice, but also explores and makes visible the sub-cultural contestations of students’ experience of schooling in a large English secondary comprehensive school.

Among the insights and developments in their paper, two resonate particularly strongly with issues of special importance at this stage of new wave student voice research. First, the role of adults, in particular the role of adults in providing challenging as well as a supportive partnership in young people’s research work, touches on difficulties and possibilities that must be better understood and more imaginatively grasped if progress is to be made. In wanting “to build a practice that valued (young people’s) experiences, but also put them to the test”, Thomson and Gunter anticipate later contributors to this Special Issue that argue for a more
dialogic, intergenerational framework for development. For them a key issue for academic researchers working with students “remains the creation of research practices which honour but do not romanticize or unnecessarily privilege the points of view of students, while at the same time shifting the generational power relations in the school”. Second, the method of photo-elicitation (or photo-voice) that plays such a key role in the students-as-researchers work also anticipates an increasing interest in visual research methods. What is particularly pertinent here is not only the link to dialogic engagement, but also to the apparent effectiveness of the method in eliciting more richly textured responses than other methods used within the research.

The companion paper “‘Student Voice’ and Governmentality: The production of enterprising subjects?” by Sara Bragg also focuses on students-as-researchers (SAR). Taking a Foucauldian standpoint, she sees this relatively new development as primarily an instantiation of neo-liberal forms of incorporation. Acknowledging that governmentality is only one potentially relevant theoretical perspective, she nonetheless rightly points out that “it enables a focus on aspects of student voice projects that are often ignored or taken for granted”. In a compelling articulation drawing on qualitative data that help us to understand the details of implementation, not just the conviction of sometimes benign intentions, she argues that student voice in general and SAR in particular have both a negative and a positive potential.

Negatively, SAR exemplifies the state’s capacity to extend its power covertly through individual embodiment of modes of identity and practice that reinforce its dominant aspirations to create a certain kind of autonomous, responsible, choosing subject who becomes a “reflexive knowledge worker”. The price of SAR is the displacement of its radical potential and its substitution by a set of affiliations and practices that assent too willingly to the beneficence of contemporary schooling. In so doing it erodes solidarities and forges alliances which, whilst not initially intended or anticipated, welcome them into the unfettered urgencies of knowledge society. Echoing concerns articulated by Arnot and Reay’s opening paper in this volume, Bragg suggests that “If (SAR) creates new alignments of loyalty and establishes a social obligation to improve school and identify with it, it creates new categories of problematic students in the process” that raise serious concerns about social class and social justice. Positively, Bragg acknowledges persistent evidence of “the pleasure students took in becoming more independent, taking their own decisions about what to do” and the occasional escape from the pressures of performativity culture, but reminds us patiently and persistently that “although the freedom SAR offers is not a sham, it does take place within a disciplinary framework and it comes at the cost of an intensification of relations of domination”.

“Visual Voices” and the Problematisation of Image-based Research

The creative potential of developing visual methods of educational research involving young people that comes over so convincingly in Thomson and Gunter’s work is explored in some depth in the next two papers. In the first of these, “The View of the
Child: Releasing ‘visual voices’ in the design of learning’, Catherine Burke argues for the resonance of “visual voice”, an apparently contradictory notion that actually turns out to “draw attention to the overlooked, over familiar and taken for granted in the material and cultural design of schooling”. Like all contributors to this Special Issue, Burke problematises monochrome or essentialist views of the child and argues strongly for the distinctive and positive contributions young people “steeped as they are in a dynamic visual cultural world from their earliest years through to adolescence” can make in envisaging what a school of the future should and could be like.

In addition to the central thrust on the potential of “visual voice” as a theoretical and empirical heuristic, Burke’s paper also picks up the thread of dialogue between adults and students which weaves an increasingly distinctive pattern in the fabric of this Special Issue. This seems to me to be an important corrective to too sharp and too exclusive a focus on the standpoints of young people that has begun to concern a number of us writing in the field. Emphasis on dialogue, on intergenerational engagement, on emergent forms of development rather than the centripetal contrivances of target-driven imperatives, seem to me entirely appropriate. Whilst not without its acknowledged dangers, for example, too swift and too unproblematic assumptions about the likelihood or possibility of dialogue under conditions of hierarchy and performativity, it re-opens an exciting terrain that invites further exploration. The second aspect of Burke’s paper to underscore here is its engagement both with the historical dimensions of public education and with specific traditions of educational thought. These not only problematise the myopic presumptions of “presentism”, but do so in ways that enrich our understanding of contemporary dilemmas and offer alternatives rooted in radical traditions currently marginalised by researchers, policy makers and teachers alike.

Heather Piper and Jo Frankham’s “Seeing Voices and Hearing Pictures: Image as discourse and the framing of image-based research” challenges contemporary research practices and the involvement of young people in equally vigorous and energising ways. The increasing popularity of eliciting visual texts from pupils/students is seen as a mixed blessing. Whilst the range of approaches, some of which the Thomson and Gunter and Burke papers have illustrated, open up an exciting and creative set of possibilities, others—particularly the use of photographs taken by young people to capture aspects of their experiences and aspirations—have been subject to too little scrutiny and, Piper and Frankham argue, it is now time to “problematicise the production, distribution, reception, and consumption of all such visual images as research questions, as part of the whole process in which they are deployed”. Through a detailed engagement with a remarkable range of interpretation, for example, Heidegger, Derrida, Jameson, Schapiro and Wortham, of van Gogh’s 1886 painting “Shoes”, we get a rich sense of possible “traps” for the interpretation of images into which even the wary can fall.

Many of these traps are exemplified in their interrogations of the recent work of Phil Mizen on children’s images of their labour. Despite the comprehensive challenge to most of what Mizen claims for his work, what emerges from Piper and Frankham’s
paper is a very positive sense of possibility that can come together from an intentional embrace of absence, of not knowing, of an ethical reflexivity that presumes less and seeks more. Notwithstanding the evanescence and openness of who-I-am and who-I-might-become-with-others there are limits which my situatedness imposes on me. Yet that awareness of those limits that configure me can be the precursor to a receptiveness that makes presumption less likely and the integrity of otherness more accessible, less remote and more conducive to the possibility of lighting, in Maxine Greene’s words, “the slow fuse of possibility”.

The Relational Basis of Democratic Flourishing

The final two papers in this Special Issue pick up on a number of matters, both of constructive critique and creative exploration, that have emerged thus far. Both authors not only point to the limitations and lacunae of much current student voice work exposed in this volume they, like many other contributors, push beyond voice to seek out alternatives that offer new directions and dispositions, in particular those that foreground the relational basis of democratic human flourishing.

As the title of her paper suggests, Alison Cook-Sather’s “Resisting the Impositional Potential of Student Voice Work: Lessons for liberatory educational research from poststructuralist feminist critiques of critical pedagogy” contains an important reminder of the resonance of a number of earlier critiques, particularly those coming out of post-structuralist feminisms that, amongst other things, argued against the broad exhortation to encourage the voicing of experience on the grounds that it inevitably re-enforced the power of those in more privileged positions and contained marginalised voices within an intellectual and cultural framework devised by those with access to power and privilege.

It also argues strongly for the necessity of finding more satisfactory ways of taking forward a praxis of student voice that has a more explicit, more demanding reciprocity at the heart of its encounter. It is not just that post-modern notions of identity insist on the often temporary, inevitably complex nature of our being in the world. It is also that voice “is created, both deliberately and unconsciously, in dialogue with other voices” and that such a dialogue must be more actively embraced by all parties if the dangers of imposition are to be avoided. Her suggestion is that we explore the conceptual and practical territory opened up by the notion of “translation”.

For Cook-Sather, “translation” has proved a fruitful notion, partly because its conceptual and existential logic require us to be attentive to “the complexities and identities of voice”, but also because we must necessarily attend to the specificities of context and the ways in which they are inflected through the languages and perspectives of young people. In this extended and multiply-intended notion of translation a researcher who fully enters into these processes “can relate to students in a way that isn’t impositional; she can translate herself rather than focus on translating the students; and she can support students translating themselves”.
In their different ways each of the papers that comprise this Special Issue point out the dangers of essentialism, unintended imposition, and the palliative of amplified talk, full of fun and fury, signifying very little and changing nothing. All are agreed on the necessity of a more imaginative and more searching engagement with covert intellectual presumptions and over-excited policy imperatives that may or may not mean well, but which too seldom take their own historical and political location seriously enough to prompt either modesty or the beginnings of a more situated self-awareness. Greg Mannion not only echoes these strictures he, perhaps more than any other contributor, insists in his “Going Spatial, Going Relational: Why ‘listening to children’ and children’s participation needs reframing” that at the heart of a genuinely and strenuously intended participatory approach to adult–child collaboration must lie new kinds of relationships between them. Furthermore, if these relationships are to be understood, nurtured and realised they need to be co-constructed in ways which are “more sensitive to how place and space are implicated in identity formation”.

Just as Cook-Sather argues for a re-articulated notion of “translation” as a way of addressing persistent difficulties and exploring new possibilities, so Mannion argues for the conjoint importance of the spatial and the relational in opening up “new, important and fertile territory” in the field of children’s participation. At the heart of his argument is not only an emphasis on the relational interdependence of adults and young people with regard to matters of identity, but also the re-affirmation that this reciprocity and loosening of role and relation is constantly in flux. Whilst applauding the valorisation of “children’s spaces” by some authors, Mannion urges an intergenerational exploration of spaces congenial to evolving roles and interdependencies. If we do not do so he argues that “we are in danger of providing a narrow view of how children’s ‘voice’ and ‘participation’ are ‘produced’”.

**Beyond “Voice”**

It is interesting to note that the limitations of “voice” as a metaphor for student engagement have become so numerous and so substantial at the very point when the cumulative impetus of consultation is beginning to acknowledge and aspire to the more complex and more challenging push for participation. “Voice” has too much about it that smacks of singularity, of presumed homogeneity, of deferential dependence on the unpredictable dispensations of those who deftly tune the acoustics of the school to the frequencies of a benign status quo.

This is not to suggest that the dominant realities of schools and other arenas concerned with the lives of young people are moving, or are likely to move, into participatory mode on anything other than an occasional basis within clearly circumscribed limits. Nonetheless, for those working with young people, including those like the contributors to this Special Issue who are committed to more reciprocal, more exploratory forms of engagement, the conceptual and empirical limitations of “consultation” are matched by increasing concerns about the adequacy
of “voice” as an appropriate rallying cry for a field whose ambitions go beyond the acceptance of the uncertain satisfactions of a conditional and occasional recognition.

The move to a more participatory form of engagement characterised by an intended mutuality, a disposition to see difference as a potentially creative resource, and more overt commitment to co-construction require quite different relationships and spaces and a quite different conceptual and linguistic schema to frame such aspirations. Of course, being aware of the deficiencies of “voice” provides some initial impetus for change, and sensitises us to distinctions and orientations that are likely to be significant. However, it does not take us very far in the exploration of new ground.

The most promising alternative seems to be “dialogue” and yet it, too, is fraught with difficulty. Whilst it picks out commitment to the relational, to emergence, to mutuality and to the necessary responsibilities and joys of joint enquiry it is also seen, on occasions, either to presume too much (e.g. the marginalisation of power relations within frameworks and societies that remain overtly and confidently hierarchical) or to presume what many would contest (e.g. the desirability of a consensus-based approach that tends to slip too easily into a premature resolution of difference).

It may well be that at this point, despite substantial support for a multi-vocal, spatially informed, action-oriented, intergenerational approach, it is not possible to name in a single word or phrase an orientation on which practitioners and researchers unhappy with the substantial limitations of “voice” approaches are likely to agree. I suspect that before we get there we will need to address at least two strands of thinking that are currently barely audible in the current literature in the field.

Reclaiming Radical Traditions

The first silence, only occasionally broken in this collection of papers, concerns a puzzling homogeneity that squats too comfortably on the intellectual haunches of contemporary practice and aspiration. Ironically, it is a homogeneity that largely ignores our past and ignores the authoring of that past. There is very little reference in the corpus of student voice work to the historical contexts within which our identities, aspirations and antipathies manifest themselves. In one sense this is hardly surprising since in England at any rate we are victims of a debilitating intellectual and cultural amnesia that in the case of contemporary education policy too often, in the words of Russell Jacoby’s withering critique of Theodore Roszak, “illustrate(s) the renewal of banality under the brand of a new profundity” (Jacoby, 1977, p. 8). Whilst I am not for a moment suggesting serious writers on student voice are banal, I am suggesting the field would be significantly enriched if, for example, we regained our sense of alternative possibilities through engaging, as our predecessors did, with writers operating within very different economic and political frameworks—for example, Anton Makarenko from the early days of the Soviet Union—or with those pioneering figures within, say, the field of radical Special Education that took seriously the necessity of “student voice” in the first half of the 20th century—for
example, Homer Lane, David Wills and George Lyward (see Weaver, 1989, for a useful overview).

In re-engaging with the richness of our heritage we will also remind ourselves that there is very little reference to the inevitable and proper contestation that shapes their narratives. Not only is it difficult to bring to mind references to student voice work that predate 1990, it is also unusual to come across references to alternative traditions of education that struggle within and against the hegemonies of the day. We do not have a single system of schooling in England any more than do other countries across the world: we have an uneven contestation between quite different commitments and loyalties amongst which radical traditions of one sort or another struggle against heavy odds. Those radical traditions, examples of which I have drawn on above, have within them counter-narratives that may well assist those of us who wish to name and make together a quite different future to the one others presume for us. Of course, as the narrator of William Morris’s *Dream of John Ball*, reminds us, we need to be aware

> How men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name. (Morris, 1968, p. 53)

Nonetheless, there are precious continuities here and it is within their parameters that we might best understand and engage in what the playwright Arthur Miller once called “the politics of the soul”. It is within these quite different traditions of radical practice that we can reclaim and learn from, for example, work of pioneers like Alex Bloom who between 1945 and 1955 created the most radical state secondary school in England (St George-in-the-East, Stepney, London) in which the practice of “student voice” far exceeded anything our new wave developments have thus far achieved (see Fielding, 2005).

**Re-imagining and Revitalising the Public Sphere**

The second silence is broken by a number of contributors to this Special Issue and is marginally less pronounced than the ahistoricism and comfortable gradualism of much contemporary student voice work in schools. It concerns the almost complete absence of the development of public spaces where the voices of young people can engage in conversation with each other and with adults who make up the internal and external community of the school. Invariably such spaces that exist are firmly managed by adults and provide neither opportunity for the reciprocal making of meaning nor the more modest apprenticeships in the apparatus of democratic living that they have the capacity to offer.Whilst intellectually surprising, given the resonance of work in political theory by people like Seyla Benhabib (1998) and Nancy Fraser (1997) and by educational theorists such as Maxine Greene (2000), it is not altogether unexpected in the field given the huge distance most schools would have to travel to even approach the foothills of such arrangements and orientations.
There are a small number of historical examples from the radical tradition, most notably at St George-in-the-East, London mentioned earlier, and there is some evidence within contemporary developments of serious engagement, both with theoretical and practical issues that augur well for the future (see e.g. Griffiths, Berry, Holt, Naylor, & Weekes, 2006; Percy-Smith, 2006, in England; and Kelly, 2003, in the USA). However, the enormous intellectual and grounded potential of this aspect of democratic education is virtually ignored, despite potentially propitious (English) national initiatives such as Building Schools for the Future that offer the possibility of a congenial site for its development.

**Breaking Important New Ground—Mourning the loss of a pioneer**

This Special Issue of *Discourse* breaks important new ground. The fact that there are new journeys for us to take and new territory to explore with energy, passion and joy depends in significant measure on the insight, eloquence and courage of those who have contributed to this issue. The fact that many of these contributors have been able to do so depends in large measure on the work of Jean Rudduck whose death on March 28, 2007 is a grievous loss to a field she did so much to establish and develop, not only in England, but in many countries across the world. Whilst she would disagree strongly with some of the positions for which I have argued in this Editorial—for example, to do with the conceptual makeup and relative merits of consultation and participation—she would applaud the vitality of her legacy and the unswerving commitment to “a fundamental change in the way we see pupils and in the power relations between pupils and teachers” for which she and Donald McIntyre argue in their book *Improving Learning Through Consulting Pupils* (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007) finished shortly before Jean’s death.

We fittingly end this Special Issue with an international Review Symposium on *Improving Learning Through Consulting Pupils* by three scholars—Susan Groundwater-Smith (University Sydney, Australia), Dana Mitra (Pennsylvania State University, USA) and Dennis Thiessen (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada)—who have themselves contributed very significantly to the development of the field to which Jean was so committed.

**References**


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