The radical potential of student voice: Creating spaces for restless encounters

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This paper starts by sketching out some of the developments in research partnerships between adults and young people within the context of formal schooling in the last twenty years and then briefly touches on some of the critiques of such work, underlining the role of values and political perspectives. The third section argues for a particular - person-centred - standpoint resting on a relational, communal view of the self that puts certain kinds of relationships at the heart of education and schooling in general, and student voice partnerships in particular. Finally, the author argues for the importance of creating spaces for restless encounters between adults and young people in which they are able to re-see and re-engage with each other in creative, holistic and potentially transformational ways. In taking this forward, the much neglected and derided radical traditions of state education offer us an important resource.

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person-centred education

Adults and young people as partners in research

New wave student voice

The mid 1990s saw a resurgence of interest, via the school improvement movement, in what came to be known as 'pupil' or 'student voice.' In England the work of the late Jean Rudduck was one of the main drivers of this approach (e.g. Rudduck et al. 1996), though her own commitment to student involvement went back to her early years as a researcher with Lawrence Stenhouse at the University of East Anglia in the 1970s (see Fielding 2007). One may also point out that commitment to student engagement preceded the school improvement movement by many decades, going back not only to the radical movements of the 1970s, but at least 50 years earlier to the pioneering work of Homer Lane in the 1920s.

Since the new wave of student voice work (Fielding 2004b) reminded the managerially inclined school effectiveness movement of the potential of student perspectives to illuminate neglected realities and

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challenge emerging presumptions, it has grown enormously in scope and influence. Listening to the voices of young people, including very young children, is now something that is not merely espoused, but actively advocated, by government departments and their satellite organisations, both in the context of formal education and also within an increasingly integrated multi-professional framework of childhood services. In addition to the numerous articulations of government education strategies, including OfSTED [Office for Standards in Education], England now has a Children's Commissioner and a number of prestigious charities and non governmental organisations supporting young people's involvement in services that affect their lives.

There has also been very substantial grass-roots interest in student voice from teachers, from young people themselves, and from university researchers. A significant part of this growth has included joint research between young people and adults. Some of the most interesting work has taken place outside the context of the school improvement movement with researchers like Priscilla Alderson (Alderson 1995), Mary Kellett (Kellett 2005), Virginia Morrow (Morrow and Richards 1996), and Perpetua Kirby (Kirby 1999). These have produced high quality work largely ignored by those working within the school improvement tradition. A very readable, insightful overview drawing on both traditions is Sara Bragg's *Consulting Young People* (Bragg 2007a) has an especially good chapter on the range of methods currently used in the consultation process by academic and teacher researchers and by young people working with them. These include surveys and questionnaires, different kinds of interviews, observation, traditional forms of consultation such as councils and forums, and newer approaches such as suggestion boxes, ideas booths, listening posts and graffiti walls. Bragg also draws attention to creative, non-verbal research and evaluation methods that have become increasingly used in recent years, in part because many felt there was undue emphasis on the spoken word with the danger of excluding children and unintentionally re-enforcing existing marginalisation. Methods such as photography, drawing, collage, multi-media approaches, and audio-recording are increasingly being used. So too are experiential, multi-facetted approaches such as logs and scrapbooks, guided tours, bedroom culture, toys, drama and role play, vignettes and scenarios.

The range of approaches and the nuanced possibilities opened up here reflect the energy and expansive optimism currently running through the field of student voice. Two things strike me as emblematic of much that is characteristic of research with and on young people in an era in which identity and agency combine synergistically with new, especially audio-visual, technology. These are, firstly, an increasingly wide-ranging body of imaginative, high-quality work which is extending visual approaches into new intellectual and experiential territory. Secondly, the growing prominence, both amongst teachers and academics, of an active partnership between young people and adults that goes beyond consultation to embrace a participatory mode in which young people's voices are part of a more dialogic, reciprocal way of working.

Students as Researchers

Picking up on the second of these developments, there are, broadly speaking, two forms of what is now often known as the Students as Researchers movement (Fielding and Bragg 2003). One approach, sometimes called Students as Co-Researchers, involves teachers identifying issues they wish to explore and seeking the active support of young people, not only in carrying out the research, but also in helping to reflect on its processes, and make meaning from the data gathered so that recommendations for change and future action can be made. In full Students as Researchers mode, the originating impulse and ongoing dynamic of the research, enquiry or evaluation come from the students themselves. It is the students who, with the support of adults, design and carry out the research and see it through to the often problematic later stages of meaning making, recommendation, and dialogue with those in positions of relative power or influence to bring about desired changes. In both modes, adults and students work in partnership, but, in the former, adult preoccupations and perspectives guide the processes and outcomes, whereas, in the latter, the reverse is the case.

There are three key assumptions underlying both variants. Firstly, young people's perspectives are sometimes significantly and interestingly different to those of adults. Secondly access to those differences is too often either highly problematic or elusive unless young people are themselves involved in a research design and process that gives space, support, and motivation to enable them to engage with issues that interest them and matter to them. Thirdly, if we manage to create conditions of dialogue, then reciprocal engagement with those differences may, at least on some occasions, turn out to be mutually enlightening and productive.

Certainly there is an extensive range of work going on in and with schools utilising various kinds of research partnerships at the present time. In my view, some of the most promising are those which underscore the lived reciprocity and synergy of young people and adults working together in genuinely exploratory ways. These include firstly, the development of Student Action Teams (see Holdsworth et al. 2001) which identify issues of concern or aspiration within their local communities and lead on the process of research and resolution; secondly the SaLP (Students as Learning Partners) scheme (SSAT 2009) in which teachers invite two or three of their students to observe aspects of their teaching and act as learning partners with them; and, lastly the move from student-led research to more explicitly intergenerational work of the kind advocated by Greg Mannion (Mannion 2007) and illustrated by Johanna Wyn and her colleagues in Australia (Eckersley et al 2007) and by my own work with John Elliott in England (Fielding et al. 2006).

Emancipation or enervation?

Interrogating professional and academic practice

Mindful of the many dangers within neo-liberal education systems of co-opting research and development partnerships between adults and young people for purposes far removed from emancipation, I set out a series of simple framework of evaluative questions to ask of any student voice initiative (Fielding 2001). These cluster round eight core considerations on which the success of work would to a considerable degree

depend, namely speaking, listening, skills, attitudes and dispositions, systems, organisational culture, spaces for making meaning, and action for the future. Of *speaking* I ask – Who is allowed to speak? To whom? What are they allowed to speak about? What language is encouraged or allowed? Who decides the answers to these questions? How are those decisions made? How, when, where, to whom and how often are these decisions communicated? Of *listening* I ask e.g. 'Who is listening? How and why?' Similarly straight-forward questions probe the other six considerations. Underpinning all of them is both a desire that this kind of work helps us all to develop more vibrant, exploratory forms of partnership between adults and young people in formal educational settings, and also a concern that student voice can too often turn out to be a dissembling device directed at purposes that have little to do with encouraging the agency and aspirations of young people.

The same concerns animate the need to interrogate academic practice, not just the burgeoning student voice work in professional contexts. Here my six questions for interrogating research practice (Fielding 2004a) are intended to prevent us from slipping unwittingly into unwanted and unwarranted presumptions that oppress or marginalise the standpoints of young people. These underscore the importance of resisting redescription in our own interests, interrogating the impulse to control, questioning the correctness of how we do things now, acknowledging our own discursive locations, facing up to issues of power and the necessity of being open to criticism, and, finally, understanding the dangers of unwitting disempowerment.

Transparent values and emancipatory ends

Applying these two sets of questions are helpful and important for two reasons. Firstly, they are intended to get beneath the surface of both well-intentioned and manipulative practices and ask a set of questions that make the values base and the lived practices of the partnerships between adults and young people more transparent and honest. Secondly, having assisted in the move towards a greater transparency and self-knowledge, will urge those involved in these kinds of research and development partnerships to pursue explicitly emancipatory ends through similarly emancipatory means.

Interestingly, the openly emancipatory, transgressive forms of Students as Researchers (SAR) advocated by Joe Kincheloe (Kincheloe 2007) amongst others, are commendably transparent in their values orientation and intentions. With the now increasingly widespread adoption in the UK of SAR as a technique of enquiry, questions of values and purposes are regrettably more opaque. As a consequence, much of the debate amongst academic researchers in this field centres round the degree to which SAR, whilst perhaps not intentionally and not solely a form of neo-liberal incorporation, is nonetheless a clear instantiation of 21st century knowledge society working its way through existing systems of schooling. This latter position is persuasively argued by Sara Bragg (Bragg 2007b). Pat Thomson and Helen Gunter (Thomson and Gunter 2007) are slightly more optimistic, and my own work, whilst acknowledging the power of Foucauldian critiques, nonetheless underlines the importance of identifying and supporting emancipatory practice (Fielding 2009b). Despite important differences between us, my sense is that we are united in our commitment to the

research community developing new forms of engagement that are mutually educative, joyfully energising and permanently restless in their pursuit of a better world.

On the poverty of high performance schooling: retrieving education as human flourishing

One of problems I have with school improvement approaches that utilise the kind of partnership work this paper is espousing, is that, in their more sophisticated forms, they pick up on many of the issues to do with the importance of the emotions and relationships in education and human development, and distort them for exclusively instrumental purposes. Much of my writing over the last five years has been focussed not only on naming and exposing these developments, but also on developing creative alternatives (see especially Fielding 2006).

On the one hand we have an approach I have called 'high performance schooling' and on the other hand we have an approach I have called 'person-centred education'. In the first of these, we have a mode which says, 'Have a nice day', as part of a human relations mantra, and in the second a mode which is genuinely welcoming and engaging of us. One mode which uses extra time for tutorials to raise test scores, and another that places personal encounter through dialogue at the very heart of its daily educational processes and intentions. One in which the sanctioning of creativity and the notion that every child matters is primarily the servant of the familiar narrow standards agenda, and another in which creativity and the engagement with young people as persons is the harbinger of a much richer, more demanding fulfilment of education for and in a democratic society. They are worlds apart and at odds with each other, but it is not always clear which frame is dominant, whose purposes are being served, whether we are the victims of those whose interests are quite other than those we would applaud, or whether we are part of something which is likely to turn out to be fulfilling and worthy of our support. In sum, it is not clear whether a more sophisticated engagement with student voice is a seductive re-articulation of institutional insinuation or a genuinely different orientation to what we do and how we might do it.

Putting philosophy to work

We need a way of understanding and articulating the fundamental differences between these two approaches that on the surface often seem to share the same language, but actually intend quite different understandings both of education and the nature of the good society. Drawing on the work of the Scottish philosopher, John Macmurray, I posit a four-fold framework which suggests fundamentally different relationships between two necessary, interdependent forms of relationship that underpin all forms of human society. These are (a) 'functional' or instrumental relationships which are defined by the tasks or roles they are required to perform and (b) 'personal' relationships which provide the interpersonal context within which we are able to be and become ourselves as persons, as human beings in its fullest and broadest sense.

If we apply these categories to different approaches to education and schooling, we come to understand the stark differences between 'high-performance' and 'person-centred' models. In the case of the

high-performance approach the *'personal is for the sake of the functional'*; people and relationships are the servant of instrumental ends. In the 'person-centred' approach the relations are reversed. Here *'the functional is for the sake of and expressive of the personal'*. Means must express ends and since, in education, the ends are primarily personal and communal, that is, how we lead good lives together, then all functional relationships and arrangements should be directed at human ends and intentions. It is those deeper and broader human aspirations that are the arbiters of legitimacy and the goals towards which we should strive.

Student voice and high performance schooling

It is clear to me that student voice operating within the high performance mode is largely an instrumental undertaking orientated towards increased measurable, organizational performance. In its most extreme form, it is about the *use* of student voice for particular kinds of adult purposes. It is often technologically and emotionally sophisticated, seemingly interested in young peoples' points of view, and attentive to suggestions that may enhance the school's effectiveness and reputation. It is, however, ultimately totalitarian and often dissembling in its dispositions and its operation: student voice only has significance and is only legitimate insofar as it enhances organizational ends. However enticing their approaches, such schools or organisations are increasingly encountering voices of young people who see, understand and reject what is going on; who feel used and abused by institutional smiles prompted primarily by the pull of performance; who refuse the Macdonaldization of human relationships and the interpersonal and spiritual obesity that follows in its wake.

Student voice and person-centred education

In contrast to high performance approaches, the student voice operating within a person-centred mode, is explicitly and engagingly mutual in its orientation towards widely conceived educational ends that will often include measurable results, but are not constituted or constrained by them. It is about students and teachers working and learning together in partnership, rather than one party using the other for often covert ends. Within a person-centred learning community, issues of power and hierarchy are at once more transparent and less secure than in other organizational orientations, and the place of values is explicit and central rather than peripheral or opaque. Certainly, the interpersonal and institutional bad faith that hangs so heavily on the coat-tails of high performance modes of engagement has no place here. Person-centred student voice work tends to be student driven, staff supported and often a genuine joint endeavour. Whilst not eradicating either hierarchy or power, the centrality of negotiation, the foregrounding of values and the willingness to work through their consequences in an iterative way, the explicitly exploratory nature of what is undertaken, and the tolerance of ambiguity and unpredictability, help to address both hierarchy and power in a recursive, ongoing way.

Relationships between students and staff characteristic of person-centred learning communities are based on mutual trust, care, autonomy, and respect and have a double significance. First, they transform the mechanics of consultation and the interstices of power through which young voices are heard, dialogue

enacted and action taken. Formal and informal arrangements become expressive of the spirit of enquiry and committed engagement, not merely minimal gestures of thin entitlement and little consequence. Secondly, they succinctly articulate and underscore the key aspirations of a democratic way of life.

The next section discusses in more depth the dialogic, intergenerational features of person-centred / communal practices and argues for the importance of 'restless encounters' between adults and young people as interdependent learners and researchers of education in its broadest sense, namely education as the reciprocal engagement in the struggle to learn to lead good lives together.

Creating spaces for restless encounter

On the importance of 'restless encounters'

One of the great weaknesses of formal institutions like schools is that they have a tendency to solidify and perpetuate the separate roles of those who come within their remit and in so doing deny or marginalise spaces of possibility. It is a weakness because, insofar as they do this, they close down the very opportunities for emergent and creative learning they are in large part intended to promote. What the practice of 'restless encounter' is intended to foreground is both the desirability and the practical possibility of not only retaining but extending this radical openness, provisionality and reciprocity. I shall give three examples to illustrate the potential of restless encounters to help us re-see each other as persons, not merely as role occupants, and in so doing nurture not only a new understanding, sense of possibility, and felt respect between adults and young people, but also a joy in each other's being and a greater sense of shared delight and responsibility in 'radical collegiality' (Fielding 1999)

My first two examples pick up on some of the approaches I touched on at the end of the first section of this paper, namely Students as Learning Partners and intergenerational research and development work in a secondary school Research Forum in England. My third and final example draws largely on the radical traditions of state education and argues for the importance of democratic public spaces in schools where adults and young people can take shared responsibility and delight in making meaning out of their work and lives together.

Students as Learning Partners

Students as Learning Partners is a recent development pioneered by Gill Mullis at the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT 2009) which draws on the Mutual Support & Observation work I had initiated earlier on. In its most common variant, Students as Learning Partners involves one teacher inviting two students whom she teaches to work with her and observe aspects of her practice. In the first phase of the process the students receive formal training, either from an external person or from colleagues who have experience of this kind of student voice work within the school, not just in observation techniques, but also how to develop a climate of trust with the teacher. Considerable emphasis is placed on the focus being on learning rather than teaching, on the kind of language students might helpfully use when discussing

observation data with the teacher, and on the absolute necessity for confidentiality. A number of observations and dialogues are undertaken and in the second phase of the process further observations are focussed on the new strategies agreed amongst the partnership.

In the context of this paper, one of the most interesting things to emerge from the work is the depth and range of mutuality and of fresh insight and understanding that often develops between the students and the teacher. It is also clear that in many instances the student partners go to considerable lengths to support their teacher. For example a teacher worked with a couple of 'A' level students to develop teaching materials on metallurgy to make it more engaging. The students were so keen to help that they put together worksheets and engaged in a lot of secondary learning by independently exploring around the subject. Whilst data of this kind is neither unique nor new, the frequency and intensity with which the reciprocity of learning is qualitatively different. It leads, not only to more respectful and generous attitudes towards each other, but also to greater self-awareness and self-knowledge.

Bishops Park College Research Forum

Until quite recently, one of the most radical secondary schools in the UK was Bishops Park College, Essex, an 11-16 mixed comprehensive high school that was the first purpose-built school-within-a–school in England. As part of the College's development and an externally-funded evaluation of its early work, John Elliott and myself set up what came to be known as the Research Forum (Fielding et al 2006). Its initial remit was to assist the evaluation team in co-developing a sympathetic evaluation strategy and to act as a sounding board for ongoing data gathering and interpretation. However, as it grew in confidence and experience, its role developed beyond the realms of evaluation and began to embrace both a values-based advocacy dimension and a community engagement dimension. Membership of the Research Forum comprised four students (two 12 year old boys and two 15 year old girls), two parents, one governor, and three members of staff, one of whom was a member of the College's senior leadership team.

The students on the Research Forum helped to organise student co-researcher teams as part of the evaluation work and two of the Research Forum students undertook video-based research themselves. They also helped set up and run focus groups which, along with the other key stakeholder groups in the college, helped to develop an evaluation framework which would provide an accountability and development tool that reflected the college's values and aspirations more sympathetically than the national OFSTED inspection framework. What is particularly pertinent to this paper is the way in which the relationships between the adults and the young people on the Research Forum changed over time. Adults and young people began to see each other with new eyes. The requirement to work together to explore matters of some significance to those involved, and the necessity of having space to explore and work in new ways, led in many instances and on a number of occasions, not only to respectful and appreciative encounters and new understandings, but also to mutual advocacy of and delight in intergenerational working.

Democratic public space at St George-in-the East Secondary School

Within the radical private school tradition of education there are a number of examples of ways in which adults and young people come to re-see each other and understand each other differently on a regular basis, both through their curriculum and their daily living together. Perhaps the most famous school is A.S.Neill's Summerhill that has been running successfully in England since the 1920s. The school's weekly General School Meeting often attracts strong interest and impassioned reactions from outsiders, mainly because the running and development of the school community was the responsibility of the General School Meeting in which the votes and views of a student was of equal value and weight to that of a member of staff. Neill's own comment is highly relevant here: 'In my opinion, one weekly General School Meeting is of more value than a week's curriculum of school subjects' (Neill 1968, 62), I would not have thought this would be something he would have disapproved of. The point of this example is not to valorise Summerhill, but to argue for the importance of democratic public spaces in which adults and young people come together to make meaning out of their work together, reflect on it, hold each other to account and make plans for the future in which all take a shared responsibility (Fielding 2009a). In those contexts of egalitarian, caring relationships and exploratory curriculum contexts which provide the necessary cultural and structural conditions for something like a General School Meeting to work, the opportunity for adults and young people to see each other differently has an emblematic significance.

Much of my current work has to do with understanding what kind of intellectual and practical work needs to be done to make these kinds of practice a living reality in state schools. Such work is located within the radical participatory tradition of democracy, rather than its better known but much less ambitious representative counterpart. Whilst I realise it will always be a minority practice, for those of us who wish to place democracy in schools and in wider society at the heart of our way of life, rather than an occasional event, its importance is substantial. There are a very few examples of this practice from state schools, such as Howard Case's work at Epping House School in special education and Countesthorpe Community College in mainstream education. Much less well known, but maybe the most compelling and radical of them all was St George-in-the-East Secondary School under the headship of Alex Bloom in Stepney, London (see Fielding 2005b). In the decade between 1945 and 1955 Bloom's development of the Whole School Meeting brought together one of the most imaginative and sophisticated unions of democratic learning and governance in England. As with other examples of democratic schooling in England mentioned above, success depended in large part on the values it strove to realise in all aspects of daily encounter, in part on the nature of the curriculum it provided, and in part on the depth and detail of its democratic structural hinterland.

The formal democratic organisation of the school was expressed through three core channels of work comprising the Staff Panel, the Pupil Panel, and, at school level, the Joint Panel. The Staff Panel met every Monday at lunchtime and included all the staff. The Pupil Panel was comprised of the Head Boy and Head Girl, their two Deputies and the Secretary, all of whom were elected by students. It also included elected Form Representatives. The panel met every Friday morning in school time and considered all school matters. There

were reports from Form Representatives and business sent by staff. It also appointed a range of Pupil Committees which took responsibility for running various aspects of school life. The Joint Panel met on the last Friday of the month. It was comprised of members of both Staff and Pupil Panels and chairs of all Pupil Committees. Reports were given by a member of staff for the Staff Panel, by the Head Girl or Head Boy for the Pupil Panel, and by chairs of the various Pupil Committees. On the Monday following the Joint Panel Meeting, there was a School Council / School Meeting presided over alternately by a member of staff and by a member of the Pupil Panel agreed at the previous Full School Meeting.

Space does not allow a rich description of the conduct of a School Meeting. Suffice to say here that it typically involved a framing of purposes and aspirations, both by the Head of School and by the Head Boy / Girl before each class offered a celebration of its learning. This was then followed by reflection and open dialogue between students and staff on any matter of concern or delight in the school. This would invariably challenge traditional hierarchies, with all ages and identities contributing before the proceedings were brought to a close by the Head's affirmation of pride and joy in the work of young people.

Such practices and traditions take seriously the importance within a democratic society of creating a public space within which members of the community can make meaning of their work and their lives together in ways which are rigorous and respectful, challenging and caring, and utterly committed to a way of being that sees individuality and community as both the condition and purpose of living our lives well together.

Innovation is not enough: why we need our radical traditions

We live in especially turbulent times. Innovation is no longer enough: it is too timid, too wedded to existing patterns of thought and practice. Competing traditions of radical thinking and practice offer a much more promising resource than the pervasive superficiality of mere newness typified by what Fred Inglis calls 'the preposterous edifice of auditing, the mad route of acronyms … that blinds vision and stifles thought' (Inglis 2000, 428). As I have argued elsewhere (Fielding 2005a), our capacity to interrogate the present with any degree of wisdom or any likelihood of creating a more fulfilling future, rests significantly on our knowledge and engagement with the past and with the establishment of continuities that contemporary culture denies. In Russell Jacoby's words, 'society has lost its memory, and with it, its mind. The inability or refusal to think back takes its toll in the inability to think' (Jacoby 1997, 3-4). We must reclaim and revoice narratives of our radical past which sustained those who fought for an education worthy of the name. We must create new spaces and new opportunities where teachers' work can not only connect with their radical heritage, but articulate their own stories and weave their own narratives into the fabric of the future.

If the kinds of partnership with children and young people could become emancipatory rather than merely part of the slick and persuasive incorporation of neo-liberalism, then we need to pay serious attention to radical traditions of thought and practice. It is within these traditions that we frequently find a profound and inspiring sense of possibility, not only because their suggestions for the future offer a wisdom and hope born of struggle, but also because the questions they asked were hard questions, questions that had to do with the

nature of social justice and creative human flourishing.

The challenge ahead is to draw from the radical traditions within and between our own countries the key notion of 'prefigurative practice', that is to say, a way of doing our work and living our lives together that exemplifies the kind of futures we wish to create. Just over 20 years ago Roger Dale suggested that

> The more radical, recent and professionally initiated concepts of comprehensive education … contain … a view of education's role in social change which sees it as prefigurative. That is to say, rather than waiting until all the necessary social engineering has been done, and the planned widespread social change brought about, this approach to social change suggests that education through its processes, the experiences it offers, and the expectations it makes, should prefigure, in microcosm, the more equal, just and fulfilling society that the originations of comprehensivism aimed to bring about. Schools should not merely reflect the world of which they are a part, but be critical of it, and show in their own processes that its shortcomings are not inevitable, but can be changed. They aim to show that society can be characterized by communal as well as individual values, that all people merit equal treatment and equal dignity, that academic ability is not the only measure of a person, that racism and sexism are neither inevitable not acceptable.
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> (Dale 1988, 17)

Much has changed since he wrote these words in 1988. What remains is the continuing, the permanent necessity to do our work and live our lives in ways which demonstrate the justice and the joy of a future that takes seriously the kinds of aspirations he names with such clarity and such eloquence.

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