Transformative Approaches to Student Voice: Theoretical Underpinnings, Recalcitrant Realities

ARTICLE in BRITISH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL · APRIL 2004
Impact Factor: 1.5 · DOI: 10.1080/0141192042000195236

1 AUTHOR:

Michael Fielding
University of London
60 PUBLICATIONS 1,350 CITATIONS

CITATIONS
231
READS
473

Available from: Michael Fielding
Transformative approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities

Michael Fielding*

University of Sussex, UK

(Received 17 December 2002; resubmitted 29 April 2003; accepted 2 June 2003)

This article explores some of the theoretical underpinnings of radical approaches to student voice and examines a number of practical issues we need to address if we wish to move towards a more transformative future. The framework within which the notion of voice is explored and critiqued falls primarily into two categories. The first, Deconstructing the presumptions of the present, explores the largely ignored problematic of much student voice work. (1) ‘Problems of speaking about others’, (2) ‘Problems of speaking for others’, and problems of (3) ‘Getting heard’ reveal a range of issues that need to be better understood and acknowledged. The second, On the necessity of dialogue, attempts a resolution, exploring the possibility of (4) ‘Speaking about/for others in supportive ways’ before offering the preferred (5) ‘Dialogic alternative: speaking with rather than for’ and further developing that line of enquiry through (6) ‘Students as co/researchers’. Finally, (7) ‘Recalcitrant realities, new opportunities’ offers some ambivalent, but still hopeful thoughts about current realities and future possibilities.

Introduction

There is now a rapidly growing literature that describes an exciting range of student voice activities that hold out the possibility, not only of these developments contributing significantly to the current debate about the future of formal schooling, but also of pre-figurative practice offering hope and inspiration for something more challenging and more transformative than the twentieth century, with a few exceptions, was able to produce. Given the richness of many of these developments and the range of parties now interested, for very different reasons, in the rise of student voice initiatives, it is surprising that only a very small proportion of the literature has taken us back to theoretical foundations that underpin both the advocacy and the emerging realities of student voice in school and community renewal. And yet, if student voice

*Centre for Educational Innovation, Institute of Education, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RG, UK. Email m.fielding@sussex.ac.uk

ISSN 0141–1926 (print)/ISSN 1469–3518 (online)/04/020295–17
© 2004 British Educational Research Association
DOI: 10.1080/0141192042000195236
initiatives are to resist the constant pull of either 'fadism' or manipulative incorporation, then it is important to be clear about what kinds of arguments and dispositions are likely to support more democratic or transformative intentions. Fadism leads to unrealistic expectation, subsequent marginalization, and the unwitting corrosion of integrity; manipulative incorporation leads to the betrayal of hope, resigned exhaustion and the bolstering of an increasingly powerful status quo. To build a sustainable future we need intellectual tools to help us expose duplicity, forestall betrayal, and demystify the presumption and arrogance of an inevitably persistent managerialism. This article offers one attempt to ask some fundamental questions of those who would use student voice for ends quite other than those to which much of it aspires; it also asks of those who intend a future that is more engaging, more imaginative, more just, more democratic, and significantly and sustainably different to the one we are likely to inherit whether the methodologies and developments they advocate are able to bear the weight of aspiration they embody.

Too much contemporary student voice work invites failure and disillusion, either because its methodologies and contextual circumstances reinforce subjugation, or because its valorization pays too little attention to the extent to which young people are already incorporated by the practices of what is cool or customary. Transformation requires a rupture of the ordinary and this demands as much of teachers as it does of students. Indeed, it requires a transformation of what it means to be a student; what it means to be a teacher. In effect, it requires the intermingling and interdependence of both. It requires an explicitly intended and joyfully felt mutuality, a 'radical collegiality' (Fielding, 1999).

My approach to a number of fundamental questions I suggest are central to the sustained development of student voice as a transformative set of practices draws as heavily on the wider literature on voice in educational research, as on the specific literature on student voice itself. The framework within which the notion of voice is explored and critiqued falls primarily into two categories. The first, Deconstructing the presumptions of the present, explores the largely ignored problematic of much student voice work. (1) ‘Problems of speaking about others’, (2) ‘problems of speaking for others’, and problems of (3) ‘Getting heard’ reveal a range of issues that need to be better understood and acknowledged, however uncomfortable that process might prove to be. The second, On the necessity of dialogue, attempts a resolution, exploring the possibility of (4) ‘Speaking about/for others in supportive ways’ before offering the preferred (5) ‘Dialogic alternative: speaking With rather than for’ and further developing that line of enquiry through (6) ‘Students as co/researchers’. Finally, (7) ‘Recalcitrant realities, new opportunities’ offers some ambivalent, but still hopeful thoughts about current realities and future possibilities.

Deconstructing the presumptions of the present

(1) Problems of speaking about others: shaping persons as research objects

The dangers of speaking for or on behalf of others have an initial resonance that is widely recognized in many countries and cultures. Perhaps less immediately apparent
are the companion dangers of speaking about others. In her seminal paper, 'The problems of speaking for others' (Alcoff, 1991/92), Linda Alcoff argues that there is substantial overlap between speaking for others and speaking about others. Whilst her claim that in speaking for others you are necessarily speaking about others is unproblematic, more contentious, and arguably even more important, is the claim that in speaking about others, even in the sense of describing what you take to be the case, you may, in effect, be speaking in their place, that is, speaking for them. The very language you use in your description is likely to be saturated with values, frequently your own. No descriptive discourse is, or can be, value-free; advocacy or interpretation is thus, to some degree and inevitably, part of your account. For Alcoff:

In both the practice of speaking for as well as the practice of speaking about others I am engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, who they are. I am representing them as such and such; or, in post-structuralist terms, I am participating in the construction of their subject positions. (Alcoff 1991/92, p. 9)

The construction of the research subject is thus a central problematic in social research and it is in helping us to understand three manifestations of its attendant dangers that the work of Beth Humphries (Humphries, 1994) turns out to be so illuminating.

In both practice of speaking for as well as the practice of speaking about others, I am engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, who they are. I am representing them as such and such; or, in post-structuralist terms, I am participating in the construction of their subject positions. (Alcoff 1991/92, p. 9)

Drawing substantially, but by no means exclusively, on the work of Edward Said (Said, 1989), Humphries argues that there are three characteristic forms which the covert construction of the less powerful research subject often takes in the hands of the more powerful. They are what she calls 'accommodation', 'accumulation' and 'appropriation' and between them, severally and in combination, they help us to understand the way oppressive structures are produced and reproduced.

**Accommodation: reconstruction, reaffirmation, reassurance.** One of the most insidious ways in which research undermines rather than enhances empowerment is through 'the accommodation of challenging and “dangerous” (dangerous that is, to the status quo) ideas to ensure they conform to already established vocabularies and beliefs' (Humphries, 1994, p. 191) Citing Hall’s research on African-American prejudice towards fellow social workers, Humphries shows how, having purported to establish prejudice among people of colour towards peers with darker skins, blame is internally located and counselling recommended as one of the most fruitful ways of addressing what is seen as essentially a matter of individual pathology. The problem of racism is thus not only conveniently confined to the black community itself, the means of its resolution is both individualistic and professionally self-interested. Said’s motifs of ‘reconstruction’ and ‘repetition’ are pertinent here: the problem on which the research focused—prejudice about skin colour—is reconstructed in such a way that it reaffirms or repeats existing prejudices and forces of domination. Furthermore, as Humphries points out, 'It is the professionals who gain most in all this, by a call for a development of their repertoire of professional skills to include an “understanding” of conflict within black communities' (1994, p. 194).

Taking a lead from the insight which underlies Humphries’ point, it is interesting to reflect on whether or not such processes of accommodation operate at the
macro-level of research trends as well as the micro-level of particular research projects. For example, to what degree are some of those within school effectiveness research engaged in an undertaking in which (a) problems which are essentially to do with the nature of education and the good life are redescribed and redefined in terms of a narrow notion of schooling and a morally thin notion of effectiveness, before (b) the model of education as social control is reaffirmed, and (c) school effectiveness experts are either invited in to sort things out or encouraged to develop strategies and approaches which enable schools to do it for themselves (see Fielding, 1997, p. 12)?

Accumulation: constructing the calculus of control. If accommodation is primarily about the defusing of potentially disruptive perspectives by processes of redescription and ideological incorporation, accumulation aspires to similar ends through a deepening knowledge of those who need to be managed or marginalized; here attentiveness to the standpoint of the researched rests upon a desire to control, rather than empower. Borrowing the notion of ‘accumulation’ from Edward Said, Humphries suggests that a significant danger of disempowering research studies lies in their ‘accumulation of information about the lives of oppressed groups, communicated through a specific language which in turn results in surveillance and regulation rather than empowerment’ (Humphries, 1994, p. 198). Whether accumulation is used in Said’s sense of a cultural process of gathering, domesticating and controlling information because of some perceived threat to the established view of things, or whether accumulation is used in Humphries’ more overtly custodial way, the object and force of its manipulative intent remains the same.

One interesting feature of both accommodation and accumulation is the central place of language in the processes of control. Here the language of the researcher is often used either to redescribe or reshape the language of the researched. This can either take the form of exclusion or metamorphosis. Examples of metamorphosis are cited by Humphries in Frank Mort’s work on the link between health, disease and moral or immoral notions of sex. For Humphries, what becomes apparent is the capacity of research to incorporate moral overtones in what purport to be accumulated facts about the lives of the poor and oppressed. Examples of exclusion are central to Carter’s suggestion that ‘the extent to which the languages of researchers not only deny teachers the right to speak for and about teaching but also form part of a network of power that functions for the remote control of teaching practice by policy makers and administrators’ (Carter, 1993, p. 8) and echo more widely held feelings of exclusion and metamorphosis instanced by Andy Hargreaves in his suggestion that ‘Teachers’ voices have frequently been silenced by policy and suppressed or distorted within educational research’ (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 12).

Less immediately obvious, but if anything more insidious, is the shaping of respondent views through the control of what is included and excluded in the text. Thus, in Kum-Kum Bhavnani’s often cited critique of the UK Community Relations Commission, which to some degree parallels Humphries’ interrogation of Hall above, the selected views of black respondents are shown to have been used to produce an
image of black residents as victims or problems, thereby reinforcing existing stereotypes. Yet, as Bhavnani argues, ‘Such research may be given considerable credibility because not only is there the implicit assumption that it is empowering because it is supposed to have “given a voice” for the black residents, but, also the use of direct speech extracts confers an added, and often seen as desirable, dimension of authenticity’ (Bhavnani, 1990, p. 146). Whilst letting informants ‘speak for themselves’ is not always as deceptive or deceiving as Bhavnani’s example suggests, even in benign hands the editorial power of the ethnographer remains. As Margaret LeCompte reminds us, the discourse selected may be powerful, truthful and authentic, ‘But it is, in fact, still a partial discourse … (which) often leaves the researcher as “an absent presence”’ (LeCompte, 1993, p. 12).

**Appropriation: knowing and accepting our place.** The process of appropriation uses both accommodation and accumulation as means to further a particular view of the less dominant group by the group in power. Appropriation is essentially about the construction or furtherance of the idea of a black person, woman, teacher, student or whatever subjugated group is under consideration in such a way that it supports, firstly, the way those groups are currently conceived of and treated and, secondly, the validation of the dominant group’s position and the consolidation of its power. Interestingly, Humphries cites Mohanty’s critique of some western feminists who ‘appropriate power by their representation of third world women, a representation which assumes implicitly the west as the primary referent in theory and praxis’ (Humphries, 1994, p. 201).

**(2) Problems of speaking for others: who do we think we are?**

If the central problem of speaking about others lies in our tendency, by default or by design, to mistake or betray the realities and interests of those about whom we speak in favour of our own or those to whom we defer, the problem of speaking for or on behalf of others compounds rather than alleviates those same difficulties and dilemmas.

Alcoff identifies two different kinds of difficulty in speaking for others. Firstly, there is the extent to which the social location or identity of the speaker shapes the way they see and understand the world. In other words, ‘a speaker’s location is epistemically significant’ (Alcoff, 1991/92, p. 7), a view borne out in a very tangible way through the rise of African-American and Women’s Studies in universities and elsewhere. For Yvonna Lincoln, this epistemic significance has substantial consequences for the conduct of educational research and leads her to suggest that if we are to adequately or convincingly research the lives of those who are silenced we will need to develop alternative epistemologies and methods because ‘Traditional epistemologies and methods grounded in white androcentric concerns, and rooted in values which are understood to be inimical to the interest of the silenced, will fail to capture the voices needed’ (Lincoln, 1993, p. 32) Part of the difficulty of speaking on behalf of others thus turns on the epistemic inadequacy of traditional research methods. We can only hesitantly speak on behalf of others significantly unlike ourselves because we lack, not
only understanding, but the means to understand those whose interests and causes
we would represent.

A second difficulty Alcoff identifies picks up on the extent to which the nature of
the differences that characterize different standpoints is intertwined with issues of
power. The degree to which a particular location is epistemically salient seems to
carry with it the implication that those who do not share that location cannot presume
to speak on behalf of those who do because, as Lincoln points out, ‘certain privileged
locations are discursively dangerous. In particular, the practice of privileged persons
speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many
cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for’ (1991/92,
p. 7). One example Alcoff cites concerns the attacks on the work of Anne Cameron,
a white author whose gifted, semi-fictional accounts of the lives of Native Canadian
women received some acclaim. Alcoff points out that although Cameron’s intentions
were never in question, the effects of her writing were seen by a group of Native Cana-
dian writers as disempowering and ‘counterproductive in regards to the needs of
Native women’ (Alcoff, 1991/92, p. 7).

A third difficulty concerns the problematic nature of group identity. The intricacies
of identity in a multi-layered, constantly shifting world make it difficult to be clear
about what constitutes a group with a particular standpoint. Given our membership
of many different, sometimes divergent groups, problems may arise about specific
group identification and allegiance.

These kinds of difficulties, which arise, in part, from the re-emergence of stand-
point epistemologies, are not, of course, without a companion set of problems, which
Alcoff readily acknowledges. Just as there are difficulties of speaking for others, so
there are difficulties of not doing so. What, for example, are we to do with a persistent
desire to hold on to issues of social justice? In choosing not to speak on behalf of those
who are excluded or marginalized am I abandoning my responsibilities to name and
confront political oppression?

(3) Getting heard: deconstructing discursive contexts

Following Foucault, Alcoff argues for the importance of the ‘rituals of speaking’, that
is to say, the different facets of social reality which constitute the discursive context
within which meaning is made. The key point here is that issues of voice are not
circumscribed by verbal or written texts; they are embedded in historically located
structures and relations of power. ‘Who is speaking to whom turns out to be as impor-
tant for meaning and truth as what is said; in fact what is said turns out to change
according to who is speaking and who is listening’ (1991/92, p. 12) Texts can mean
different things to different people in different contexts. In a number of situations,
who is speaking makes a considerable difference as to whether they are taken seriously
or not. In many circumstances, in the UK as well as North America, a white, middle-
aged, middle-class man is more likely to be given a hearing than a young, working-
class, black woman. ‘How what is said gets heard depends on who says it, and who
says it will affect the style and language in which it is stated, which will in turn affect
its perceived significance’ (Alcoff, 1991/92, p. 13). Epistemology turns out to be
politically located and, if not politically contested, then politically implicated. ‘Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle’ (Alcoff, 1991/92, p. 15). Thus, according to Alcoff, in the USA, European post-structuralists have to date been taken more seriously than similarly oriented African-American researchers. None of this is to say that one can or ought to read off the truth of an utterance simply by reference to its origins and its discursive context. However, it is to say that discursive context plays a hugely important role in the emergence or otherwise both of the articulation and consequence of what is said, by whom, to whom, and to what effect. Whilst location does not determine meaning and truth, it certainly has a bearing on both.

The historical location of the structures and relations of power to which Alcoff refers is also important. It is not just a question of who is speaking to whom, but the historical context in which that encounter takes place. For Hargreaves, the richness of this historical context is an essential prerequisite to any attempts to understand the voices of teachers: ‘What matters is that these voices are interpreted with reference to the contexts of teachers’ lives and work that help to give them meaning’ (1996, p. 16). For Lincoln, understanding and awareness of historical context is a necessary precursor to the emerging agency of the oppressed. Thus, she argues that ‘Some means must be provided whereby the silenced can come to terms with the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which the research effort is embedded’ (1993, p. 43).

For Bhavnani, too, historical context is important, not just as an aid to understanding, but as an agent of interrogation. She argues that to include hitherto silenced voices in research is not of itself empowering or liberating, not only (as we have already seen) because such inclusion may be manipulative, but also because unless we are clear who is listening, whether such attentiveness is customary or spasmodic, an entitlement or a dispensation, then the power of those who speak and those who hear cannot be properly understood. Such an incomplete picture is inaccurate and unhelpful because the processes which led to the initial silencing and then the permission to speak are absent and therefore not open to interrogation. ‘If the presentation of an explicit political framework is avoided and the unstated voices are the voices of reaction, then these come to be celebrated in the same way as the voices of the dispossessed’ (Bhavnani, 1990, pp. 146–147).

**On the necessity of dialogue**

**(4) Speaking about /for others in supportive ways**

The kinds of issues Alcoff and Humphries have raised about the difficulties of speaking about and/or for others comprise a formidable case against such practices, and my own view is that, as Alcoff suggests, we should, wherever possible, construct alternative approaches. I will say something about what those approaches might look and feel like in a moment. What I want to do here is reflect on what we might do in circumstances where these alternatives are not yet available, in cases where ‘the practice of speaking for others [in this case students] remains the best possibility’ (Alcoff, 1991/92, p. 24).
In working with students, whether we are teachers, teacher-researchers, or researchers, we will inevitably find ourselves talking about them and, perhaps less frequently, on behalf of them or for them. In such circumstances it may be helpful to ask ourselves a series of questions that have their origins in the kinds of issues we have explored earlier. These might include the following.

(i) **Resisting redescription in our own interests**

*How confident are we that our research does not redescribe and reconfigure students in ways that bind them more securely into the fabric of the status quo? (Accommodation).*

One of the key contemporary issues in student voice research, which suggests a new and more sophisticated phase of its development, concerns the plurality of voices that inevitably and properly wish to be heard. So long as an undifferentiated notion of student voice is assumed or valorized, there is a significant danger that issues of race, gender and class are sidelined and in that process of presumed homogeneity the middle-class, white view of the world conveniently emerges as the norm. Recent research from the USA (e.g. Silva, 2001) reminds us of the classed, ethnic and gendered nature of even well-intentioned student voice developments. In the words of a young black male member of a school outreach group:

> We got squeaky wheels and flat tires ... Some smooth white walls rollin' their way right to college, getting' oil all the way. And then the rest of us ... flat tires! Bumpin on down the road, makin' all sorts of crude noises. Probably fall off real soon anyway. Ain't worth the grease. (Silva, 2001, p. 95)

Reflecting on the wider issues raised by the experiences of the outreach group, Elena Silva asks, ‘Which students are representing the student voice of their school? And in the context of reform, can these students who are best served by the current set-up of their school possibly serve the interests of students who are least well-served?’ (2001, p. 98).

(ii) **Interrogating the impulse to control**

*How clear are we about the use to which the depth and detail of data is likely to be put? Is our more detailed knowledge of what students think and feel largely used to help us control them more effectively? (Accumulation).*

Current approaches to target setting illustrate some of the dangers and possibilities that student data holds. Much depends on the values and dispositions that underpin our work with young people. Certainly, the present mania for target setting which has disfigured and distorted the moral, political and existential quality of our daily practices is constrained by an improverished set of assumptions about what motivates us and what helps us to learn (Fielding, 2001a). Target setting within the context of school effectiveness is primarily an instrument of control which is at once hierarchical, unidirectional and so severely focused it tends to lose contact with the values base that gives it meaning and legitimacy. Thus, concern for results overrides concern for persons; an overbearing emphasis on outcomes supplants the integrity of means and ends; managed freedom displaces expressive freedom; and unitary learning is
preferred to learning that is reciprocal or mutual. Under these circumstances and within this intellectual and political remit control is the order, not just of the day, but of the era. In contrast to target-setting practices typical of an alternative, person-centred perspective, data becomes the handmaid of delivery rather than dialogue; control circumscribes imagination as well as action; students become objects of our professional gaze rather than agents of our conjoint learning; examination and micro-management corrode the very creativity that, ironically, is becoming the *sine qua non* of post-industrial society and the knowledge economy.

(iii) *Questioning the correctness of how we do things now*

*Are the results of our research likely to be part of an elaborate means by which the powerful are reaffirmed in their superiority and the disadvantaged confirmed in their existing lot? Is our current interest in student voice rooted in our fear that they may be rocking the boat? Is our real commitment to ensuring that we return to the calm of familiar waters? (Appropriation)*

There are some voices we wish to hear and others we do not and in dismissing those that seem to us as too strident, too offensive or too irresponsible we may often miss things of importance and of a deeper seriousness than our first impressions allow. This comes over strongly in two very interesting recent pieces of research from the UK. In Leora Cruddas’s work (Cruddas, 2001) with female secondary school students with emotional and behavioural difficulties one cannot help but be struck by their insight and their justified anger. Cruddas’s capacity to listen and learn from those young women, their insight and sensitivity, their unequivocal messages to their teachers—‘It’s the way they [the teachers] talk to us. We’re not dirt you know’ (Cruddas, 2001, p. 63)—all testify to the richness of possibility that exists within the most marginalized of groups within our school system. Sara Bragg’s elegant and insightful ‘Taking a joke: learning from the voices we don’t want to hear’ (Bragg, 2001) provides a wonderful example of the virtues of patience, humility and humour in both pedagogy and research. In concluding a delightfully witty, wise and in many ways shocking article she is concerned that ‘the pressures of needing rapid results (of student voice research work) may lead us to listen most readily to voices that make immediate sense’ and makes ‘a plea to take our time with the anomalous, to allow what doesn’t fit or produces unexpected reactions in us to disrupt our assumptions and habitual ways of working—because I believe that it is from these that we may, in the end, learn the most’ (p. 73).

(iv) *Acknowledging our discursive location*

*Are we sure that our positions of relative power and our own personal and professional interests are not blurring our judgements or shaping our advocacy?*

Even when staff are supportive of student voice work there remains the danger of a specifically adult, situated perspective getting in the way of deeper understanding. A recent piece of North American research by Dana Mitra (Mitra, 2001) illustrates this well. In one of the high schools she was working with the senior staff;
were struck by the difference it made having students interpret the focus group data rather than adults alone. They noticed that when adults analysed the data, they translated ‘student speak’ into adults’ words that did not always have the same meaning. Having ... students at the table preserved the integrity of the student voices by ensuring that adults understood the issues students felt were most important. (Mitra, 2001, p. 92)

(v) Facing up to issues of power and the necessity of being open to criticism

To what extent are we willing to not merely accept responsibility for what we say, but be genuinely attentive to criticism from those for whom we speak?

When we (myself and Louise Raymond, then deputy headteacher) first began our ‘Students as Researchers’ work at Sharnbrook Upper School & Community College, Bedfordshire in 1996 (Fielding, 2001b), one of the apparent successes of our first year’s work was with a student research group whose focus concerned the experience of Sharnbrook students with trainee teachers. The group conducted an elegant and insightful piece of research and made some important recommendations that were to eventually (2 years later) develop into a radical new approach to key aspects of initial teacher education. Among these recommendations was the suggestion that trainee teachers and students negotiate a set of issues about their shared experiences of teaching and learning over a designated period and have an exploratory dialogue. The school supported these recommendations and did its best to interest universities who had trainees on placement. Initially, despite persistence, the school was unsuccessful in this. Its error was not in its commendable efforts to develop this new approach, but rather in its failure to adequately inform the student research group what it had been trying to do on their behalf. The students were furious and felt badly let down in a whole range of ways. What the school learned—and what it had intended from the outset, but, for all sorts of understandable reasons had failed to carry through—was the importance of not only acting on research recommendations, but making sure that student researchers were aware of and involved in whatever follow-up work was agreed.

(vi) Understanding the dangers of unwitting disempowerment

Are we aware that, despite our best intentions, our interventions may reinforce existing conceptions of students that tend to deny their agency and capacity to take responsibility for what they do ‘and perhaps also silence [their] own ability to speak and be heard’? (Alcoff 1991/92, p. 26). The key question to ask of our intervention is ‘Will it enable the empowerment of [the group on whose behalf we speak i.e. students]?’ (Alcoff, 1991/92, p. 29).

One of the most striking things that one of Leora Cruddas’s students said about the highly successful student voice work she had experienced was, ‘I think it’s sad that we have to have this group just to voice our opinions. Don’t teachers realise we’ve got opinions?’ (Cruddas, 2001, p. 63). No doubt there were caring, highly committed staff at that young woman’s school who worked in a dedicated way with girls with emotional and behavioural difficulties. No doubt staff did speak up on their behalf in the genuine belief that their interests were better served via staff intervention than by
enabling students to voice their own concerns and aspirations. Nonetheless, the question posed by that young woman is both humbling and inspiring and is a fitting exemplification of the wisdom of Linda Alcoff’s remarks.

(5) The dialogic alternative: speaking with rather than speaking for

Many of us will find ourselves in positions where the best we can hope to do is be as attentive and committed as we can to applying these six questions to our daily work with young people. There are, however, at least two alternatives. The first, championed in Alcoff’s view by writers like Foucault and Deleuze, is to let students speak for themselves. The second, championed by writers like Gayatri Spivak (Spivak, 1988) and Alcoff herself, argues that merely to allow groups like students to speak for themselves is to assume that they can do just that in ways which presume a transparency and self-knowledge that may not be justified: ‘to promote “listening to” as opposed to speaking for essentializes the oppressed as non-ideologically constructed subjects’ (Alcoff, 1991/92, p. 22). For Alcoff and Spivak, the most promising way forward is one in which the advocates of the oppressed (or, in this case, students) retain their discursive role and work for the construction of dialogic encounters which allow for ‘the possibility that the oppressed will produce a “countersentence” that can suggest a new historical narrative’ (Alcoff, 1991/92, p. 23)

The intention is to avoid the equally mistaken polar opposites of, on the one hand, ignoring or excluding the speech of the marginalized group, and, on the other hand, treating its inclusion as unproblematically insightful and liberating. The first is not merely a wasted opportunity, but a denial of what Hargreaves calls ‘humanity, democracy and sound sociology’ (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 16). The second instantiates the almost adulatory delusion which Spivak and Alcoff oppose: the presumption of insight in the oppressed is as foolish as its a priori denial by those in positions of power. For a number of writers the central hope and justification of dialogic encounters lie more in the act of dialogue itself than the content of what is said. The very act of speaking within these kinds of context encourages an epistemic agency, a capacity to construct legitimate knowledge. It is this act which challenges a central imperative of oppressive projects which invariably seek to keep apart the knowing agent and the object of knowledge. For Alcoff it turns out that ‘The problem with speaking for others exists in the structure of discursive practice, no matter its content, and therefore it is this structure itself that needs alteration’ (Alcoff, 1991/92, p. 23). The exploration and transformation of existing discursive sites needs to be partnered by the construction of new opportunities for ‘dialogic encounter’.

The kind of argument for the development of dialogic encounters between researcher and researched which Alcoff begins to develop has been taken up by a number of researchers in the last decade, in particular, by Yvonna Lincoln and Margaret LeCompte in McLaughlin and Tierney’s important collection, Naming Silenced Lives (McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993).

Four points emerge from their work which are particularly pertinent here. Firstly, the development of dialogic research is educative for those being researched. Lincoln suggests that potential benefits include collaborative agenda setting, discussion about
appropriate methods of collecting data, debate about overall research design, involving relevant others at key points, the production and analysis of collective research knowledge, the probing nature of its display, and the degree to which the solidarity of the group and its capacity to solve problems is enhanced. In sum, ‘Only with dialogue, dialectic and criticism will collaborators in research come to a new understanding, both more sophisticated and more informed, about the circumstances of their lives’ (Lincoln, 1993, pp. 42–43). Secondly, dialogic research is similarly educative for those conducting the research. The marginalization of particular groups is, for Lincoln, a ‘diminution of civic life’, not only for the excluded, but also for those ‘whose lives are constricted and abridged by virtue of ignorance and the absence of meaningful social critique’ (Lincoln, 1993, p. 39). For LeCompte, this exclusion of the ‘counter-hegemonic’ (LeCompte, 1993, p. 10) is diminishing for similar reasons. Thirdly, in its richest manifestation, dialogic research is essentially a partnership whose particular potential is well caught by LeCompte’s advocacy of ‘double description’ and ‘double consciousness’, a process which ‘requires the consciousness, or embrace of the “other” in ways that change researchers and those they study so that their destinies are inextricably linked and shared’ (LeCompte, 1993, p. 17). Fourthly, and finally, the kind of dialogic research which involves the genuine partnership of the researcher and the researched has the potential to change more than an aspect of their lives which happened to be identified by a particular enquiry. Those who have in the past so often been the mere objects of investigation, themselves become the agents of their own transformation: ‘the silenced in becoming producers, analysts, and presenters of their own narratives, cease to be the objects of their histories and knowledge. They are enabled instead to become the agents of the stories which are produced and consumed about them, and the agents and instruments of their own change processes’ (Lincoln, 1993, p. 43).

(6) Students as co/researchers

It seems to me that the promise of a dialogic model of student voice is considerable. I have argued elsewhere (Fielding, 1999, 2001a, b, c) that the potential for transformation is more likely to reside in arrangements which require the active engagement of students and teachers working in partnership than in those which either exclude teachers or treat student voice as an instrument of teacher or state purposes.

Initiatives that either exclude teachers or seek to engage them in less than central ways, often late on in the process, include those which rely heavily on external intervention, e.g. university, local education authority, government2 in pursuit of external agendas. These are unlikely to have anything other than limited success and stand little chance of sustainability, let alone transformation. Student voice work requires the active, early engagement of key staff and the emergent openness of a significant proportion of their colleagues.

Initiatives that seek student opinion, e.g. via questionnaire or focus group, on matters identified, framed and articulated by teachers/other adults are also unlikely to go beyond the initial flush of enthusiasm. Students will soon tire of the increasing number of invitations (a) to express a view on matters they do not think are important;
Transformative approaches to student voice 307

(b) framed in language they find restrictive, alienating or patronising; and (c) that seldom result in actions or dialogue that affects the quality of their lives.

My own experience of research and development work with students and teachers in the UK and South America suggests that either the student as co-researcher or student as researcher models (Fielding, 2001b) hold out greater prospect of transformation, primarily because they are both dialogic. Students and teachers need each other, need to work as active partners in the process if it is to be either worthwhile or successful.

Students as co-researchers. In the student as co-researcher model the enquiry lies with the teacher and its conduct and completion rely heavily on her his experience and expertise. However, it cannot succeed without the engagement of students as fellow researchers, enquirers and makers of meaning. Thus, a primary school teacher keen to develop more independent learning with her. Year 1 students asked them their view of independence in learning, what it meant, what it felt like, what it looked like. She and the class discussed these matters, developed an observation schedule, jointly videoed lessons, sat down and looked at the video data, discussed what it meant to them, and developed new learning and teaching practices together. Here the teacher learned things about independence in learning from her engagement and dialogue with her student co-researchers that she could not have done from traditional action research. Similarly, her students as co-researchers learned things about independence in learning, about their individual and collective agency that they could not have learned in other ways.

Students as researchers. In the student as researcher model the issues for investigation are identified by students who are trained in the skills and values of research and enquiry and supported in their work by teachers who have also been learners at the training events. Here students shape the subject, pace and pattern of the research. Student leadership is constitutive and distinctive of this approach. The assumption is that the standpoint of students and the standpoint of staff are different and in those differences lie the possibilities of creativity and renewal. Students tend to see the world of the school differently to the way that adults see it and, even if they identify similar issues as being of particular importance, invariably they will have different understandings of their nature and significance. Staff enable the practical realization of the research and support the development of the skills and dispositions of individual and group learning.

Thus, in a large English secondary comprehensive school students have researched a whole range of issues from profiling and assessment, to trainee teachers in the school, to the tutorial programme, to gender differences, to use of information and communications technologies, to what helps and hinders learning (see Raymond, 2001, Fielding, 2001b, see also Crane, 2001 and Harding, 2001 for student perspectives on this work). What is particularly interesting here is not only the topics of research (beyond toilets and uniform and into the nature of teaching and learning)
but the fact that in at least some instances the manner of the enquiry and the substance of the recommendations have challenged conventional wisdom at a profound level. Thus, the research on the tutorial programme not only challenged the then dominant pedagogy (both of the school and of the UK Government) and the curriculum models on which it was based (against curriculum as delivery and for curriculum as the making of meaning), it also led to students themselves being part of the mixed group of students and staff who had responsibility for monitoring and evaluating the new practices that were subsequently introduced in response to the research recommendations. In its most creative form, students as researchers involves staff and students learning with and from each other and in doing so the traditional roles of teacher and student become much less firmly fixed, much more malleable, much more explicitly and joyfully interdependent.

(7) Recalcitrant realities, new opportunities

Whilst I would argue strongly for a dialogic model of student voice work in schools, I am also aware of its difficulties and limitations. There are two that seem to me particularly significant at the present time: the first because its resolution offers a particularly difficult challenge that must be faced before progress can be made; the second, whilst if anything even more difficult than the first, because it offers hope for the future and energy for the present.

**Performativity and surveillance.** The first set of difficulties lies in the context of performativity and surveillance (league tables of results, performance management) within which many teachers now work and make it especially hard to develop the kind of dialogic approach I have been advocating. The strength of dialogue is in its mutuality. Its transformative potential lies in its reciprocity because it is in these kinds of person-centred (Fielding, 2000a, b) arrangements that trust and creativity are most likely to grow. If we see and relate to each other within the context of a reciprocal responsibility we will indeed transform what it is to be a teacher, what it is to be a student, and the spectre of schools as nineteenth-century institutions will begin to fade. However, the context of performativity and a narrowly conceived, incessant accountability leads too readily down the path of a carping, antagonistic relationship between students and teachers, one in which students become the new agents of external control (Fielding, 2001c) or regressive pedagogy. With the hyper-examined approach of Curriculum 2000, examples from post-16 education abound. Students, under pressure to soak up more and more information in increasingly short periods of time, put huge pressure on teachers to ‘deliver’ thicker and thicker sets of notes and often feel let down if some folders are thinner than others and irritated if pedagogy strays from the dull and the dutiful. Similar pressure is emerging at university level. Lambeir and Smith (2003) give a recent example of:

a student who complained that the course we taught was making him think. ‘What I expect from a module is everything set out in order so I know what to take on board for the exam. I want things set out in bullet-points, bang, bang, bang’ (he jabbed the air three
Dialogue and its spaces. The second set of difficulties is bound up with the largely anachronistic structures and cultures that still condition our practices and expectations of schools at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Schools as we now know them have developed two separate arenas within which students on the one hand and teachers on the other make sense of their experience and articulate their aspirations for the future. They are not of equal importance and one is immensely more powerful than the other. Students have student councils and other arrangements within which they pursue their joint interests. Teachers have team meetings, faculty meetings and so on. Occasionally, students are allowed to present issues in faculty meetings and staff attend student council meetings. But, so far as I am aware, there are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together. Until and unless such spaces emerge transformation will remain rhetorical rather than real. It is, as Alcoff remarked earlier, ‘the structure of discursive practice ... that needs alteration’ (Alcoff 1991/92, p. 23). We need new opportunities for dialogic encounter.

Certainly, I have come across substantive examples where the pressure for dialogue has been expressed by staff who are both supportive and critical of students as researchers’ work. They have been supportive of the process and of the values and intentions that lie behind it. But they have been critical both of the quality of the research findings (more notes = more learning!) and, equally importantly, of their lack of an opportunity to express both their disquiet and their support in a ‘space’ that is conducive to that kind of respectful, but potentially creative disagreement.

This last point about creative disagreement is important for reasons other than the chance divergence of views about a particular piece of research. It is central to any inclusive notion of community to which my own view of student voice and its potential for transformation owes its allegiance. Researchers like Humphries and Martin (2000) rightly critique notions of community and voice that fail to acknowledge the realities of power differentials. Following writers like Lorde (Lorde, 1984) who argue that ‘difference must not merely be tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic’ (Lorde, 1984, p. 112) and Barbara Christian (Christian, 1987), who argues that ‘the voices of students (and others) should be taken at their word as “valid”, but not without response’ (Humphries & Martin 2000, p. 291), Humphries and Martin suggest we nurture spaces where ‘others can speak on their own behalf’ (p. 290), where, following Lather (1992), ambivalence and difference offer a positive context for making meaning.

Whilst I am uncertain about these two matters of performativity and surveillance and space for dialogue, I am not despondent. There are examples of new communities of practice developing between students and teachers despite the unpromising external frameworks within which we currently work. And I am confident that it will
not be long before we see imaginative examples of new spaces emerging in schools where students and teachers acknowledge and delight in their mutuality, in their reciprocal responsibilities for the world we live in now and the world we wish it to become, in their 'radical collegiality' (Fielding, 1999, 1999).

Notes

1. The writers on whom I have drawn couch their arguments in terms of 'the oppressed'. Whilst many of them do not write about school students, I have taken the spirit and the substance of what they have to say and applied it to the context of student voice work. Some might argue that to suggest students are 'oppressed' in an equivalent way to those whose ethnic, class or gender background is subordinate to those in power is to overstate the case. Whilst I understand this perspective I nonetheless think there is a legitimate case to be made. Certainly, the libertarian tradition in education would argue vehemently in support. Also, much of the data emerging from contemporary student voice work in the UK points unremittingly to students as the objects of earnest, but often misplaced, government and teacher zeal that grants young people no significant agency, no appropriately or genuinely shared responsibility, and little hope of a future that bears their mark or their commitment. In the words of one of Leora Cruddas’s students, ‘Some teachers don’t listen because they think we’re young and don’t know anything. I know that’s not true’ (Cruddas, 2001, p. 63). See also the recent work by Andrew Pollard and Pat Triggs (Pollard & Triggs, 2001; Fielding, 2003) on the experience of young people in primary school between 1989 and 1999.

In suggesting it is legitimate to see young people as in some meaningful sense 'oppressed' I am not, however, denying other dimensions to their experience in the world. Nor am I valorizing them in an unthinking way. As I suggest later in this article, young people are as affected by the more pernicious aspects of contemporary schooling as the rest of us and are currently in danger of being co-opted into the service of performativity.

2. My point is not to query external involvement. Quite the reverse. There is substantial data from all over the world that external involvement is very important. My concern is with approaches that place too heavy reliance on an external dynamic, often at the expense of internal commitment.

References

Bragg, S. (2001) Taking a joke: learning from the voices we don’t want to hear, Forum, 43(2), 70–73.


