THE SERA LECTURE 2002:
THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF CONSULTING YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT TEACHING, LEARNING AND SCHOOLING

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SYNOPSIS

School improvement is a question of dealing with the deep structures of school and the habits of thought and values they embody. Our view of students has, for a long time, been held in place by such 'habits of thought' but we are now moving beyond the 'silenced voices' to a re-valuation of what young people can contribute to the analysis and planning of their experiences as learners. What forces are sustaining this development? Are they sufficiently robust for teachers to work with them to effect real change in the conditions of learning in school? And, as Stewart Ranson asked, is encouraging young people to find a voice and to learn the practices of cooperative agency fundamental to the revitalisation of our schools as learning communities within democratic society? Are we creating a new order of experience for students in schools – or is this just a passing fashion, a tokenistic nod in the direction of consumerism?

INTRODUCTION

School improvement, as Ruth Jonathan has said, is not just a matter of 'rapid response to changing market forces' but a question of dealing with the deep structures of school and the habits of thought and values they embody. Our view of students has, for a long time, been held in place by such 'habits of thought' but we are now moving beyond the 'silenced voices' to a re-valuation of what young people can contribute to the analysis and planning of their experiences as learners.

YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY AND THE LEGACY OF TRADITIONAL IMAGES OF CHILDHOOD

'It were right good. They treated you like adults'. This fourteen year-old boy was talking about his local work placement. It is not an unusual response. Wanting to be treated 'like an adult' is shorthand for a number of aspirations to do with what we have called the 'conditions of learning' in school: in particular the need for respect, responsibility, challenge, support. It is not a new plea but it is one that we need to give serious attention to because I think it is a factor in the process of disengagement from school and its purposes.

Schools, in their deep structures and patterns of relationship, have changed less in the last fifteen years or so than young people have changed. Out of school, many young people are involved in complex relationships and situations, both within the peer group and the family and they may be carrying tough responsibilities. Schools, in contrast, often offer less challenge, responsibility and autonomy than students are accustomed to in their lives outside school. Kenway and Bullen argue, in their recent book (2001), that young people today *are* different:

> Today's children and youth have variously been called the Supermarket Generation, the Screen Generation, the Computer Generation, the Nintendo Generation, Techno-kids and Cyberkids.

There are other labels, such as the Lost Generation, that go beyond 'technological reductionism' and emphasise other aspects of identity. The young people in schools

today are the first generation—Generation Y—'to have experienced, from their infancy what Lyotard (1984) calls the "computerization of society"'. It is, say Kenway and Bullen (2001, p57, discussing Nucifora, 2000) 'a generation with heretofore unheard of access to consumer information. Couple that with expanded choice and what results is greater individuality and self-expression…'. Young people have a significant niche in the market and are courted as consumers. 'Cool', say the authors, 'is an object of desire which can be bought' (*Ibid* p.48). The strategies through which advertisers appeal to young people include the promise of feeling in control (like being able to phone anyone, anywhere, at any time), of having their desires met (like wanting to be seen to be older), of being socially acceptable, and of owning or wearing things that are socially valued. Advertising (unlike education) homes in on 'contemporary relevance' and the 'now' factor (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p.47).

Indeed, as Nieto (1994) says: 'Educating students today is a far different and more complex proposition than it has been in the past' (pp395; 396). I think we need a better fit between schools and young people, a more accomplished way of recognising their capabilities and hooking into their thinking. We know that from an early age young people are capable of insightful and constructive analysis of social situations and if their insights are not harnessed in support of their own learning then they may use them strategically to avoid learning in school and conspire unwittingly in the process of their own under-achievement.

There have been two dominant constructions of childhood. One emphasised the natural wildness of children, the other, their natural innocence. Of course, the impulse behind mass education was, as Jones (1990, pp57-8) has pointed out, a concern 'to regulate the nomadic, dissolute, degenerate, and marginal population of the urban slum'. Teaching was a technology for transforming 'wild beings' into 'ethical subjects'. The romantic view was equally constraining: the child came from God, 'trailing clouds of glory', entitled to freedom and happiness. Rousseau explored this alternative view of childhood in a treatise, *Emile*, published in 1762, which had, apparently, an electrifying effect: 'Women particularly adored it. Such was the demand that booksellers found it less profitable to sell the book than to rent out copies by the hour' (Darling, 1994, p6).

But the most enduringly comfortable assumption, and one that has shaped policy and practice in many aspects of life, has been that childhood is about dependency. Children are widely thought of as 'incomplete, vulnerable beings progressing with adult help through stages needed to turn them into mature adults' (Mayall, 1994, p3); we are pre-occupied, says Oakley (1994, p23) with their 'becoming'—'their status as "would-be" adults'—rather than with the here and now state of 'being', and this perception leads us to under-estimate their present capabilities. Recent work in the sociology of childhood is an important counter-weight to such attitudes and presents an image of young people as accomplished social actors in their own world (James and Prout, 1997, p.ix). However, in schools young people still lack the power to influence the quality of their lives. Indeed, young people were described in the early 1990s as 'the most photographed and the least listened to members of society' (in Holden and Clough, 1998). It is time to review our notions of childhood.

What Gerald Grace (1995) called 'the ideology of immaturity' is still pervasive in some schools. Only a few weeks ago a researcher on our boys' achievement project, reporting on how—and whether—the school had explained the shift to single sex teaching to students and what they thought of it, was told that 13 year old students were 'too young to express an opinion'. As Wyness (2000) observes, 'In many contexts and for a variety of reasons, the child as a subordinate subject is a compelling… conception…' (p. 1).

It is not easy to change our perception of students in schools: we are battling not only with the legacy of the past which constrains our view of what schools and young

people might be but we are also struggling with a set of powerful contemporary initiatives that limit the possibilities for change by defining achievement narrowly and by keeping teachers on a tight rein. As Apple and Beane (2000) recently said, democratic schools are not just places fit for students to learn in but places where teachers can also 'exercise meaningful control over their own work'.

STUDENT VOICES *CAN* MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Lawrence Stenhouse died twenty years ago this September but his ideas are still powerfully relevant. During the 1970s debate about the objectives model he talked about the importance of being alert to the 'unpredictable achievements' of young people. The idea is a useful counter-balance to the targets, modules and safe uniformity of outcome that marks the present climate. I learned from working with Lawrence Stenhouse not to underestimate young people. They are our expert witnesses. Indeed, what they say about their experiences as learners in schools challenges assumptions and provokes reflection – and has led to changes, both nationally and locally in schools.

I recognise that there are two main arenas for student consultation – projects where external researchers go in to schools to gather data from students and in-school initiatives where teachers (sometimes supported by external research teams) are working to build a more inclusive and participatory community where young people can offer constructive critiques of teaching and learning, help design units of learning, act as mentors to their peers, and work with teachers to tackle persistent problems, such as bullying. Much of the data that I want to discuss here has come from the former but a strength of this mode is that the external researchers, in writing up their work, can make public students' perspectives and demonstrate to a wider audience the capability of young people to comment insightfully on issues affecting their lives and learning in school. The strength of teacher-led initiatives is the possibility of acting on what students say in ways that can make a difference to their learning.

There are many examples that I could offer: pupils in an English primary school tackling together the issue of noise in the classroom and constructing guidelines, which were typed up and placed around the school, in which voices were colour-coded for different purposes (e.g. playground voices were red, one-to-one classroom voices were pale blue, and so on); a Scottish secondary school (a case study in a Secondary Schools Ethos Network publication) where, over time, pupils have become comfortable with running councils and where working groups of council volunteers tackle significant issues – including a high profile anti-bullying campaign; a school where pupils discussed the limitations of the current reward system and helped plan and design a new system, including a set of medals for effort and achievement in less high-profile areas of the curriculum. These are all ideas that were a response to a problem in a particular school but which other schools with similar concerns might usefully pick up and adapt. Here I wanted to draw attention more to the way that pupils' observations on the organisation of learning in school led to a national initiative and challenged thinking and practice across a considerable number of schools. This is a summary of what we learned, as external researchers, about the 'dip year' – the post-transfer year. (The students, who were from English schools, talk about it as 'year 8'.)

There are some critical moments during the period of schooling when commitment to learning can drift. The most obvious one—and one that in England has caused some concern nationally—is the second year after transfer. What we learned from students was that year 8 has neither the compelling novelty of year 7 nor the promise of ownership through option choices of year 9. Nor does it have the 'real world' urgency of years 10 and 11 with their opportunities for exploring the world of employment and their preparation for the serious work of the examinations. At this

stage, the novelty of the new school is giving way to regularity: 'You think, "Oh God! I've got this today!" and so on… It gets really boring and you don't feel excited any more coming to school' (y8,f). The beginnings of drift may be apparent towards the end of the transfer year itself, especially if some of the work is experienced as repeating what was done in the primary school. Year 8 seems to lack the kind of identity and challenge that engages students and, as a consequence, there can be, among those whose motivation is fragile, a turning away from learning.

This view is confirmed by data from students in different schools in different parts of the country:

> *Year 8 is like our last year of not doing - it is like being a child really isn't it?*

> *I always feel like that, 'Oh, I shouldn't be working this hard because it is only year 8.*

> *Year 8 is the only year when you can have a rest.*

Boys were often strategic: some had planned, by year 8, to do the minimum needed to get by and a small minority said that by the end of year 8 they had sussed out which teachers didn't check homework and had given up doing it in those subjects. What they did not see were the longer-term implications of their avoiding work at this stage in their school careers.

Students receive a lot of messages - from the school, from parents and from the media - about what matters in secondary school and some adjust their effort in the light of those messages – again. in ways that can ultimately disadvantage them. The most common message they receive is that what *really* matters is the work for the examinations - which 'starts', in their eyes, in year 10:

> *(It's) like end of fourth year and beginning of fifth that you start doing stuff that counts and it's got nowt to do with first, second or third… Might just as well have just come fourth and fifth and have done with it.* (y8,m)

> *It's a new year so you can start from scratch.* (y8,m)

> *Well, I know like this year and next year are the most important years and I've got to cram everything in.* (y8,m)

On the basis of our analysis of interviews we concluded that year 8 needs to be given a stronger and more learning-oriented identity. If the transfer year is characterised by the process of initiation into a new social context and new ways of learning, year 8 needs to be marked by opportunities for greater responsibility and creativity, occasions for thinking and talking about learning, and for establishing skills of organisation and self-direction. Students who do not build good foundations at this stage can find later that they have left things too late and that it is easier to opt out than to try to catch up.

We also concluded that more needs to be made of young people's social maturity as they move through school: being a year older matters when you are nine or twelve. 'Progression', for most of us, is about advancement in curriculum terms but we also need to think about progression in terms of young people's need, with each new year, for more responsibility in school, more opportunities to make decisions about their learning, more scope for active, problem-solving work on real issues. If we don't find ways of recognising young people's increased social maturity then a possible consequence is that they take the initiative and demonstrate their status in unacceptable ways - by dominating younger students, for instance.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS?

There are two dominant concerns that lead teachers and researchers to give more

attention to the voices of young people in schools. One is the improvement agenda, the other is the empowerment agenda. At the most utilitarian end of the improvement agenda are those schools where there is no history of listening to students and who have told us that they want to start by consulting those pupils who are at risk of getting low grades in the 16+ examinations in order to lift their grades (from a D to C) into the band which 'counts' for the school's reputation. At the more open end of the empowerment agenda are schools—and often individual teachers—who are concerned that young people should experience autonomy and learn to manage responsibility within the community of the school so that they leave with perspectives and capabilities that will stand them in good stead in life beyond school. In fact, we think that in some settings both agenda come together in that students are more willing to commit themselves to learning in a place where they know that they are respected, listened to and supported. Interestingly, Sammons, *et al*. (1994) and Gray, *et al.* (1999), drawing on correlational analyses of school effectiveness studies, have suggested that schools achieving more rapid progress are those which 'had actively sought out students' views as well as giving them more prominent roles' in school.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR STUDENTS?

On the basis of evidence emerging from our current Project, Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning (funded by the ESRC as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme) we would suggest that being able to talk about your experiences of learning in school and having your account taken seriously offers students four key things:

- a stronger sense of membership - *the organisational dimension* - so that they feel positive about school;

- a stronger sense of respect and self worth - *the personal dimension* - so that they feel positive about themselves;

- a stronger sense of self-as-learner – *the pedagogic dimension* – so that they are better able to manage their own progress in learning;

- a stronger sense of agency – *the political dimension* - so that they see it as worthwhile becoming involved in school matters and contributing to the improvement of teaching and learning.

We also have evidence of more positive attitudes to learning, changed perceptions of teachers, a readiness to look at things from the teacher's perspective, and, importantly, a developing capacity to talk about teaching as well as about learning- provided of course, that teachers are willing to engage in such dialogues.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR TEACHERS?

Hearing what students have to say about teaching and learning can offer teachers:

- a more open perception of young people's capabilities;

- the capacity to see the familiar from a different angle;

- a readiness to change thinking and practice in the light of these perceptions;

- a renewed sense of excitement in teaching;

- a practical agenda for improvement.

I want to spend a little more time on teachers because they hold the key to unlocking the transformative potential of student voice. I've modified what Lawrence Stenhouse

once said to fit the context of this paper: 'It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the classroom by understanding how their pupils learn' and to do that they have to be prepared to talk to them about learning – and to see them differently. What helps teachers to see students differently? Quite often it is reading their comments in published research reports but even more compelling are the comments from their own students. Here the head of maths in a secondary school talks about her work with 13-year-old students; she had been encouraging and using feedback on her maths lessons:

> *One girl in particular clearly seemed to understand—better than I did!—how she learned. Some, interestingly, were immediately reflective in a highly sophisticated way—beyond my expectation—but nobody had known that before because nobody had asked them. For others the [capacity for] reflection grew through the process of reflection.* (Webb, 2001)

David Hare (2000) wrote about '…an ideal of theatre founded in recognition' where spectators are 'charged up by the presentation of their own lives, sitting in the dark, sometimes openly resentful, sometimes openly thrilled'. These words capture teachers' variable responses to pupil commentaries on aspects of school life that they think we know well. And a character in a play by Stoppard said that reality can often become a 'blur in the corner of your eye' and that, in the repetitions of our working lives, we often need something to 'nudge it (back) into existence'. Comments from students can have this power; they challenge assumptions and lead the teacher to 'see' students as they are and not as they have been historically—and conveniently—constructed to fit the regimes of schooling. And as teachers see students differently so they are more likely to trust them and offer more opportunities for them to influence the focus, pace and content of learning. And this is what students say they want.

Earlier, I mentioned the two agenda that drive many of the initiatives on consulting students – the empowerment agenda and the improvement agenda. In the present climate it is easy to disparage the latter as concerned with grades rather than with students, with the school's reputation rather than with their students' learning, but we should not underestimate the practical value of student commentaries for improving aspects of their everyday lessons and relationships. For instance, teachers learned a lot when 15-16 year old male students, in interviews about what turned them off learning, started to talk about the difficulty of changing from being a 'dosser' to a 'worker'. One said that most teachers never forgot the bad things he'd done and that his favourite teacher was the one who said that every lesson was a clean slate – for her, a forgetting rather than a remembering. Another described how little praise he got because of his reputation as a nuisance in classes:

> *No-one's praised me in quite a long time actually. But I think they're used to me being a trouble-maker and they don't want to go back on themselves by praising me. I'd faint if they did. No, I'd be.* (Brown, field work notes)

And this student, showing a greater empathy for teachers than they seem to have shown for him, said this:

> *Me personally, I've brought a reputation upon myself. I'm known to be the class clown and so I've decided to change… and… I went on report and I got, like, A1, A1, best, top marks, but there's just been some lessons where it's slipped and they're like 'Oh, he's still the same'. I can understand how they feel about that'.* (Brown, field work notes).

Such comments help teachers to see what the world of school looks like from the position of the student and they can gain a better understanding of the difficulties some students face who want to settle down to work but feel trapped by the images others

hold of them. Some relatively small changes in teachers' behaviours could make a difference to the self-esteem of such students and to their academic progress.

We know that at some level teachers already consult students on a daily basis in small unobtrusive ways, asking them about events in the family and checking out in class what they understand and what bothers them but some students say that this is not enough – they want more dedicated attention and they want more opportunities to talk about problems with learning and to contribute to decisions that affect them in school.

On the whole we have not found teachers exploring the potential of consulting students because they are obliged to do so by the Children's Act although the existence of policy recommendations (and Scotland has led the way here[3]) may be a useful source of support for those teachers who need to argue the case with fellow teachers or with parents. Our interpretation of teachers' motivation is that many are anxious to escape the increasing bureaucratisation of their work and see student consultation as a way of bringing the relationship of learner, learning and teacher together – restoring it to its rightful place at the centre of professional practice. The energy that comes from building a productive partnership with students is exemplified in the words of this teacher:

> *You know, that's what made me enthusiastic because I suddenly saw all that untapped creativity really… You can use students' ideas in a very valid, interesting way and it can make the student excited, the teacher excited and you know obviously the lessons will take off from there…, if you can actually collaborate with students… I didn't realise it – it's… exciting isn't it?* (Pedder, 2001)

Tuning in to what students say can be a professionally re-creative act. So, although the climate of performativity may be hostile teachers are still able, if their spirit can 'transcend the cramped conditions of the time' (Tanner, 1987), to carve out a new order of experience for students in schools.

SOURCES OF ADVOCACY

Given the strength of teachers' testimony that consultation can 'work' for pupils it is ironic that it has been so slow to make its way into mainstream education. Lansdown, for example, notes 'the absence in recent years of opportunities for pupils to contribute to national debates about key issues which they have direct experience of, such as 'testing and the National Curriculum, bullying in the playground, how schools are run' (1994, p37). And Kozol (1991, p5; cited in Shultz and Cook-Sather, 2001, p5) observes wryly that '(We) have not been listening much to children in these recent years of "summit conferences" on education'. Holdsworth, from Australia, comments on the slow take-up of student consultation and participation in education, pointing to the 'huge body of evidence' in other fields: 'work in the areas of resiliency, health and well-being, morbidity etc, that emphasises the critical nature of participation to individual and societal health' (2001, p2).

However, the main sources of advocacy for consulting pupils seem to be these; appeal is made to:

- *principles of democracy in school* as a preparation of young people for their part in society;

- *young people's rights* including their pedagogic rights;

- *the idea that schools need to be more inclusive* and to offer more opportunities of involvement to students as the main stakeholder group;

- *students' personal and social development* which, it is argued, will be nurtured by the respect and confidence that being consulted can offer;

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- ***practices of teaching and learning*** in that the voices of learners can help define a practical agenda for improvement.

Some of these appeals are implicit in the preceding text; here I want to open up the first – the appeal through principles of democracy; it commands support from a wide range of educationists and has found a powerful niche in current debates about citizenship education. Gerald Grace endorses the argument that pupils should take a more active role in school 'both in management of their own and others' learning and in the organization and running of the school itself… because for pupils such participation will be a part of their earliest formal political education' (White, in Grace, 1995, p.57). Grace justifies his position on grounds similar to those put forward by members of the citizenship lobby, namely that the best way of preparing young people for an informed and active commitment to a democratic society is to ensure that they experience principles of democracy enacted in the daily life of the school. The discussion paper, *Education for Citizenship,* produced by Learning and Teaching Scotland (2002), says this:

> *The main contention of this paper is that young people's education… has a key role to play in fostering a modern, democratic society whose members have clear senses of identity and belonging, feel empowered to participate effectively in their communities and recognise their roles and responsibilities as global citizens* (p. 2).

It seems, from the range of support for pupil consultation as part of citizenship education, that Stewart Ranson's question (2000) was clearly rhetorical: he asked whether encouraging young people to find a voice and to learn the practices of cooperative agency was fundamental to the revitalisation of our schools as learning communities within democratic society.

Berryman also addresses the needs of society, arguing for student voice on the grounds that 'For the first time in our history, the education needed to function effectively in labour markets in both high- and low-skill jobs looks similar to that needed to participate effectively as citizens, to work through moral dilemmas, or to make intelligent purchases of often complex goods and services… The educational challenge common to these disparate activities is to prepare individuals for thoughtful choice and judgement' (1992, p. 345). And Levin (1998) citing Giddens (1994) argues for 'dialogic democracy': 'Increasing diversity coupled with greater and quicker communication and higher levels of education will necessitate much more problem-solving through discussion and mutual accommodation'.

But while the body of support for consulting pupils is strong, practitioners (both researchers and teachers) are not always finding it easy to translate principles into practices. I look first at issues in the process of consultation itself – by-passing concerns about the practical dimensions of consultation (eg whether to invite spoken or written responses, whether to use 'focus' groups or talk to individual pupils, and so on); which will be explored in one of our forthcoming Project reports.

ISSUES IN THE PROCESS OF CONSULTATION

The transformative potential of consultation is considerable but it can fall short of making a difference to and for students because of power issues embedded in methodologies and contexts, including ways of interpreting and representing what students say. Michael Fielding and I (Fielding, 2002; Fielding and Rudduck, 2002) have looked at aspects of the process of consulting pupils—and the process of developing frameworks for consulting pupils in schools—and we've identified a number of 'power issues' that we think could limit the democratising potential of student voice.

The key issue is whose voice can be heard in the acoustic of the school (Bernstein, in Reay and Arnot, 2002), and by whom. Moreover, how *what is said* gets *heard* depends not only on who says it, but also on style and language. A student interviewed by Diane Reay in our ESRC/TLRP project said this: 'Some teachers act as if the child is stupid. Because they've got a posh accent, like they talk without 'innits' and 'mans'—like they talk proper English—and they say (to us), 'That isn't the way to talk', like putting [us] down'. And Mitra (2001) discusses the attempts of an ethnically and socially mixed group of students trying to work together on projects designed to enhance student responsibility and status in school:

> *When the group first came together as a community of practice, they didn't yet have the language to articulate who they were. And this contributed to their struggles to agree upon a joint enterprise… The students needed to get along with students different than them – students from different cliques, who speak different languages, who are different tracks in the school's academic system.* (Mitra, 2001)

One of the problems was the feeling among some that those who were more articulate in the language of the school establishment were more likely to shape the decisions of the group, leaving others feeling disenfranchised in an initiative specifically designed to empower them. Silva discusses a similar problem (2001). One of the members of the student reform group, an African American male, describes two broad types of student in the school - and, as it turned out, in the project group:

> *We've got squeaky wheels and flat tyres… Some smooth white wheels rollin' their way right up to college, gettin' oil all the way. And then the rest of us… Flat tires! Bumpin' on down the road… probably fall off real soon anyway. Ain't worth the grease.* (Silva, 2001)

Problems in the group's working together again centred on language. The group 'had to be diverse in order to work but the white females students at school had different views and a different language from black students who had experienced marginalisation. The latter wanted the group to be challenging and activist… In comparison the successful students, predominantly white, expected the group to be less reformist' (Silva, 2001, p5). The important point is that consultation processes can sometimes reflect rather than challenge the existing dividing practices in schools and the regimes which lead to some pupils being valued above others.

And here's a slightly different example from UK schools. Teachers who are working in traditional school cultures are finding that they have to start building their new 'learning community' by working in a small-scale and relatively protected way with a few students who are then invited to 'display' their capacities for constructive analytic dialogue to other teachers, to the senior management team and even to governors and to conferences of teachers in other settings. The problem is that this pioneering group of students can become an elite, creating new hierarchies within the body of students itself. Their status is often rooted in competence in talk which may, in turn, be linked to social class differences.

TRUST AND OPENNESS IN THE DIALOGUE

There are many silent or silenced voices – pupils who would like to say things about teaching and learning but who don't feel able to without a framework that legitimates comment and provides reassurance that teachers will welcome their comments and not retaliate. Here are two examples, the first from a student in an American school and the second from a student in an English school:

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

One of my teachers, she is completely biased to girls. She doesn't like boys and it's not really very good because the boys never get asked questions, they never get picked for to do examples. (Lanskey's field notes, 2001)

In those two examples the students are sharing their frustration with the listening researcher but in the next one they are making a distinction between what they are feeling about the lesson and what they can actually say to the teacher about the lesson. They are talking about the pace of learning being too slow:

Jemima: You'll probably think to yourself,' Oh hurry up please sir, you're driving me nuts!' You feel like you've got to be in there until Christmas. Kelly: I think if someone's going really slow I'd feel like saying, 'God sir, I'm not a snail, I'm not a dunce, ... I'm not dumb, sir; we can take it going a bit faster' but (what) you (actually) say (is): 'Sir? Please can you go a bit faster, please?' being polite. (in Reay and Arnot, 2002)

What students have to say about teaching and learning may be feared by teachers as personally challenging or as threatening to the institution. A strategy of the fearful is to limit student comment to aspects of school life which are seen as relatively safe or which do not have significant impact on the work of adults within the school, such as uniform, school meals or the colour of the classroom walls but where *do* pupils talk about injustices that they experience or observe in the classroom and which they do not feel they have power to act on at the time?

It is during the early stages of developing consultation that these uncertainties and anxieties among teachers are more dominant: teachers are moving from what some will have experienced as an us/them situation to one in they are building a new kind of partnership in learning, what Michael Fielding (1999) has called 'a radical collegiality'. Moreover, consultation may expose differences of opinion between teachers and pupils which will have to be discussed and resolved. The recent CES study, *Gender and Pupil Performance in Scotland's Schools* (2001), argues that pupils should be consulted about issues that affect them, such as gender policies; it goes on to detail some of the issues where there was disagreement – for instance the nature of a new awards system that a school had introduced without consulting pupils first, and the different perceptions of target setting which teachers saw as a way of 'motivating pupils and helping them to organise their work efficiently' but which some pupils saw as an additional source of pressure (p.125).

But while these tensions and anxieties are understandable, Ben Levin (1999) has pointed out that the fear of students as 'revolutionaries', bent on undermining the system, is mostly unfounded: most students' wishes he says, are 'modest, even timid. They do not seek to overthrow the system, or even to control it. They do, however, want to understand why things are done as they are. They would like to be able to voice their views about change and have them heard. They wish to have some more choice about how and what they learn'. These are all reasonable expectations. And also, importantly, students want to find and be able to speak in their own voice:

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

We also have to ask whether the topics 'permitted' for discussion with the students in schools are ones that *they* see as significant and whether the discussions are occasions for genuine dialogue in which students can speak, without fear of retaliation, of concerns, passions and interests which are rooted in their developing sense of justice and of self (Fielding, 2002). Initiatives that seek student opinion on matters identified, framed and articulated by researchers or teachers or that invite comment on issues that students see as important and that do not lead to recognisable action, or discussion of possible courses of action, are unlikely to be seen as credible. Students will soon tire of invitations (a) to express a view on matters they do not think are important, (b) are framed in a language they find restrictive, alienating or patronising, and (c) that seldom result in actions or dialogue that affects the quality of their lives (*ibid*.). As Fielding said, 'We…regard it as crucial for student perceptions and recommendations to be responded to, not merely treated as minor footnotes in an unaltered adult text'.

And if data from student consultations are not discussed by students, then it is difficult for them to appreciate both the diversity of views that often exist within the class or school and the dilemmas posed by diversity for follow-up action. As Reay and Arnot noted (2002), 'there is no homogenous pupil voice even in a single working group but rather a cacophony of competing voices'. If we are to build open and trusting relationships as a basis for constructive dialogue then students need, at the very least, to know what is happening as a result of what they have told the visiting researcher or the researching teacher in school: if they have made specific proposals, they need to know what is possible and what is not possible. As a year 6 pupil said, in one of our projects, You've asked us if there's anything we'd like to change - but will it happen?' (Urquhart, 2001).

DILEMMAS OF REPRESENTING AND INTERPRETING THE VIEWS OF OTHERS

Humphries (1994, discussed in Fielding, 2002) points to two particular dangers, that of 'accommodation' and 'accumulation'. 'Accommodation' occurs when challenging ideas are modified so that they conform to and do not disturb the existing orthodoxy. For example, in one school, 17-year-old students were concerned, now that they were in 'the sixth form', to have more say over things that mattered to them but after discussion with senior teachers the agreement that was reached limited their influence to being able to choose the colour of the pullovers to be worn by their year. 'Accumulation' is not something that I have directly experienced; it works in this way: if consultation deepens our understanding of marginalised groups, one of the possible consequences is that we could, if we so wished, use this information and understanding to exercise greater control over them. A more common experience for us is summed up by Hart (1997) in the well-known ladder of participation; at the bottom of the ladder are three rungs where consultation or participation are described as manipulative, merely decorative or tokenistic:

Tokenism	Children seem to have a voice but have little or no choice in the subject or style of communication and no time to formulate their own opinions.
Decoration	Children used to promote a cause but have no involvement in organising the occasion.
Manipulation	Adults consciously use children's voices to carry their own message.

A more democratic approach to consultation (see Fielding and Rudduck, 2002) would be characterised by agenda setting that is collaborative, by the involvement of students in the design of the research project (if research is appropriate); by

discussion of methods of collecting information, and by the production of collective research knowledge; it is an indication of success if the group's capacity to confront problems constructively and collaboratively is enhanced.

REALISING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF CONSULTING STUDENTS

When we talk about 'voice research' we are usually contemplating the serious task of eliciting and presenting the experiences and views of groups on the margins, thereby helping them to move from silence and invisibility to influence and visibility. Such research has a transformative agenda (Fielding, 1997) and its aim may well be to create more inclusive schools where young people's views and experiences are, as part of the normal order of things, taken seriously and where students and teachers together see themselves as part of a learning community. Teachers and researchers who are interested in student '*perspectives*', as opposed to '*voice*', are more likely to locate consulting students within a school improvement frame where the danger can be that students are seen merely as producers of 'interesting data' (*ibid.*).

The transformative impulse seeks to change the status and sense of agency of students, bringing them in from the margins so that their voices can be heard. This means establishing processes whereby dialogue with students would become 'part of the normal way a school goes about its daily work' (Fielding; 1997); there might be an 'institutional requirement' that students would be partners in regular dialogues which would 'inform the life and development of the community'. But the task of changing schools in planned and coherent ways is formidable; as Maxine Greene (1985) said, 'Schools seem to resemble natural processes: what goes on in them appears to have the sanction of natural law and can no more be questioned or resisted than the law of gravity'.

Transformation requires an interruption to the regularities of school life—a rupturing of the ordinary (Fielding, 2002)—that enables teachers and students to 'see' alternatives; and it requires, ultimately a coherent institutional commitment. As Watson and Fullan (1992, p219) have said, this will not happen 'by accident, good will or… *ad hoc* projects. [It] requires new structures, new activities, and a re-thinking of the internal workings of each institution'. Schools will need support in the task of 'reshaping long standing structures that have fostered disconnection, separateness, division'… features that have prevented teachers and students in schools from 'sharing powerful ideas about how to make schools better' (Warsley, *et al*, 1997, p204). But it is happening – and teachers are leading the way.

Difficulties arise from the context of performativity and surveillance (league tables of results; performance management) within which many teachers now work and which make it especially hard to develop the dialogic approach. As Ian Frowe (2001) has said, '…the need to 'get on' has infected the whole educational experience so that there is little or no time for genuinely open conversations through which children may have opportunities to develop their understanding and learning' (p98). Children's learning can never be properly supported if teachers cannot find time to listening to them and a pre-condition is that they 'see the students' perspective as worth engaging with' (Sleeter and Grant, 1991).

There are of course some situations where change characterised by new partnerships in learning is less likely to happen: where the academic success of the majority is assured and endorsed by parents then pupil consultation may not have a foothold - here change is risky and could threaten achievement patterns; in schools where pupils are convinced they don't matter; in schools where students are stridently oppositional and anti-work - at the personal level pupils may be suspicious of its language base and/or embarrassed by being seen talking with teachers; in schools where the oppositional stance of large segments of the student body is so strong that there can be no suspension of disbelief about the possibility of building alternative teacher-pupil relationships.

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However, where schools persevere with the principle of student consultation and participation and are able to sustain it over time and over a range of activities in the school there is evidence (see Fielding and Rudduck, 2002) among *students* of enhanced self-confidence, greater independence in learning and a greater commitment to the school and its purposes. At *teacher* level, there is evidence of a greater awareness of and delight in the capacity of young people to surprise with their creativity, their insight and their sense of responsibility, and of a richer understanding of the nature of learning. At *school* level student consultation has led to a review of assumptions about young people's capabilities and rights and to the creation of more inclusive and responsive communities.

If I have a concern at the moment it is with the 'fashionableness' of student voice. As Barnett (1953) said, some innovations are so appealing that they 'can hardly keep pace with the rumour of their own invention'. Consulting students is a bit like this: it has become so popular that in a climate of short-termism interest may burn out before its transformative potential has been fully appreciated. And there is a danger, if consultation is captured as part of an inspection process, that what pupils say may be used as evidence *about* teachers in the context of inspections and performance related pay instead of feeding into a dialogue *with* teachers about teaching and learning.

But at the moment the climate is generally open, receptive and supportive and many of us in education share Raymond Williams's 'passionate concern that people who might otherwise find themselves victims of history should be able instead to understand [and act on] their own circumstances' (Hare, 1989) – both in school and in their lives beyond school.

NOTES

1. Many of the ideas in this paper have emerged through dialogue and collaborative work with colleagues on various projects, in particular Susan Harris and Gwen Wallace who worked on an ESRC Project (1991-94), *Making Your Way through Secondary School,* and also colleagues working on a current ESRC/TLRP Project, *Consulting Students about Teaching and Learning* (Madeleine Arnot, Sara Bragg, Nick Brown, Helen Demetriou, Michael Fielding, Julia Flutter, Caroline Lanskey, John MacBeath, Donald McIntyre, Kate Myers, David Pedder, Diane Reay, Beth Wang – and many teachers and students).
2. The aims of the Consulting Students about Teaching and Learning Project are to:
   • demonstrate the serious and constructive contributions that students can make to teaching, learning and to school organisation;
   • demonstrate the different roles and responsibilities that students can take in schools;
   • offer basic support and guidance for teachers who are new to consultation and who want to initiate some form of consultation process;
   • offer support and guidance to teachers who want to extend the principle of consultation on a whole-school basis and extend students' participation.
   The project ends its first stage in May 2003 and will be followed by a short period for communication and dissemination.
3. I am indebted to Bethan Morgan, PhD student at Cambridge supervised by Donald McIntyre, for pointing out that the new Education Act in Scotland, which came into force in October 2000, explicitly recognises the contribution of pupils; she quotes from *Standards in Scotland's Schools* which states that there will be a duty to involve pupils in the preparation of the School Development Plan and in decisions concerning the everyday running of their school.

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