

MICHAEL FIELDING

## STUDENTS AS RADICAL AGENTS OF CHANGE

**ABSTRACT.** The paper opens by asking sharp questions about the current vogue for consulting students about various aspects of their experience of schooling. The unwitting manipulation often embedded in much of this activity is contrasted with a radical approach known as 'Students as Researchers.' Having described the still current joint work in a UK high school that has developed since 1996 the paper moves on to consider the transformational nature of the project and ends by offering two frameworks: one suggests a number of key questions pertinent to any evaluation of the institutional conditions for student voice; the other provides an overarching conceptual re-appraisal of the domain. Practical examples are given and the compelling nature of the "Students as Researchers" approach reaffirmed.

### INTRODUCTION

Those teachers and researchers who have for many years fought long and hard for the legitimacy and necessity of student voice as central to an authentic educative undertaking are currently faced with a disturbing paradox, namely, that the very processes and form of engagement to which they have been so committed are in danger of turning out to be stifling rather than empowering, not only for students, but for their teachers too. On the one hand, teachers, researchers, parents and adults in general speak too readily and too presumptuously on behalf of young people whose perspective they often misunderstand and, in many contexts, frequently disregard. There are some (e.g. Connolly, 1997; Rudduck, Chaplin & Wallace, 1996) who urge caution, but by and large such warnings as there are go unnoticed or unheeded. On the other hand, students' views are sought more often and more urgently than ever before, usually via teacher generated questionnaires, increasingly (and ironically) administered by fellow students. What both have in common is fear and the attendant desire to control. Student voice is sought primarily through insistent imperatives of accountability rather than enduring commitments to democratic agency. The value of student perceptions in contemporary high stakes contexts consists largely in their capacity to alert schools to shortcomings of their current performance and possible ways of addressing the deficiencies. The



*Journal of Educational Change* 2: 123–141, 2001.

© 2001 Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.

cost of ignoring student perspectives that point to a significant area of professional concern could well turn out to have tangible consequences in an inspection report or public perception of the school's local and regional standing.

Of course, raising test scores and holding teachers accountable for increased productivity are not necessarily antithetical to a democratic project or other more widely conceived intentions. However, the pressures of a narrowly articulated agenda too often jeopardise an adequate realization of genuinely educative endeavour. Certainly, the underlying intellectual framework of school effectiveness cannot, by its very nature, accommodate the integrity of an approach that sees ends and means as necessarily interwoven (Fielding, 2000). And there lies the rub. If we are to avoid the dangers of developing increasingly sophisticated ways of involving students that, often unwittingly, end up betraying their interests, accommodating them to the status quo, and in a whole variety of ways reinforcing assumptions and approaches that are destructive of anything that could be considered remotely empowering, then we have to explore approaches that have different starting points and quite different dispositions and intentions.

The work described in this paper is rooted in just such an attempt: it argues for a transformative, 'transversal' approach in which the voices of students, teachers and significant others involved in the process of education construct ways of working that are emancipatory in both process and outcome. I have argued elsewhere for the resilience and persuasiveness of its intellectual roots in the field of social science research (Fielding, 1998), drawing in particular on feminist researchers like Linda Alcoff (Alcoff, 1991/2) and Beth Humphries (Humphries, 1994) and on the enduring work of Yvonna Lincoln (Lincoln, 1993; 1995). What I wish to do here is provide concrete instantiation of its practical and theoretical resonance in a collaborative research and development project between Sharnbrook Upper School & Community College, a Bedfordshire Upper School (High School) serving students between the ages of 13 and 18, and myself over a period of three years.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE *STUDENTS AS RESEARCHERS* PROJECT

##### *Year 1 (1996–1997)*

What came to be known as the *Students as Researchers* project began life in November 1996 as part of Sharnbrook Upper School's participation in the IQEA (Improving the Quality of Education for All) school

improvement initiative based at the University of Cambridge School of Education. Sharnbrook had been part of IQEA for some time and had a long-established tradition of teacher research and evaluation. It also had a strong tradition of student involvement that included year and school councils, student led action teams trained in peer counselling, student representation on the governing body and a number of other initiatives such as student curriculum evaluation groups that participated in departmental unit and course reviews in some curriculum areas.

In the winter term of the first year a small group of staff began to look in a concerted way at the issue of student involvement in the life of the school and, more particularly, at the issue of student voice. As the IQEA link person I brought to the enquiry a background of experience and interest in issues of student involvement. We<sup>2</sup> made the decision to form a group of students of mixed age and gender and a range of attainment who, together with three members of staff in support roles, would be trained in research and evidence gathering techniques as well as establishing a shared understanding of the values, dispositions and commitments which would make partnership between students and staff both real and demanding. *Students as Researchers* was to be an initiative in which students themselves identified issues they saw as important in their daily experience of schooling and, with the support of staff in facilitating and enabling roles, gathered data, made meaning together and put forward subsequent recommendations for change shared with their fellow students, with staff and with the governing body of the school. As such it was a quantum leap, not only from traditional approaches to student involvement such as student councils and peer-led learning, but also from the engagement of students in staff-led action research which was by then an established feature of Sharnbrook's professional culture. Here the location of power, perspective and energizing dynamic was to rest primarily in the collective control of the students themselves.

We studied what little literature we could find related to our initial intentions. Whilst in a number of significant respects very different from the approach we wished to take, we found the work of Nieto (Nieto, 1994), Rudduck (Rudduck et al., 1996) and Suzanne Soo-Hoo (Soo-Hoo, 1993) very helpful. Closest and most resonant with our aspirations was the 'Students as Evaluators' initiative pioneered by Campbell et al. (1994) which worked in ways that seemed to us to be more overtly empowering of the students involved, less heavily dependent on university or third party engagement and potentially more congenial to incorporation within the structures and cultures of daily life within the state school system. We also drew on my own experience of innovative student involvement in the

UK in the mid 1980s (Fielding, 1989) and on the rich history of student engagement characteristic of Sharnbrook's ethos and identity.

We took considerable care, both at the start of the initiative and at subsequent regular intervals, not just to inform staff what we were trying to do but draw on any existing experience and enthusiasm which might help us in our work. Our approach was intended to be open and dialogic, not merely managed and informative.<sup>3</sup>

Our first cohort consisted of fifteen students ranging from Year 9 (aged 13 years) to Year 13 (aged 17 years). Prior to those students and the three supporting members of staff coming away for a day's training at the university I ran an introductory session in which we began to explore what it was we were trying to do and how we might go about it. It quickly became evident that the sophistication and insight of the students was substantial, that their concerns and aspirations mirrored those expressed by staff and that the issues they wished to explore included matters of profound significance, both to themselves and to their teachers. As well as providing grounding in a number of key issues in the conduct of school based research, the training day itself offered a further opportunity to explore intentions, establish priorities and, most important of all, work towards a shared understanding of the principles and values which were to underpin the work of the group.

The group decided to explore three topics – student voice, student experience of trainee teachers and the school's assessment and profiling system. With the support of a member of staff over the ensuing two months, they gathered data in a variety of ways and occasionally met as a whole group for further sessions either to support each other's work-in-progress or to have further external support with data analysis and the presentation of findings. Each group produced a report setting out their research intentions, outlining their methodology, presenting their data and its analysis, and offering recommendations for future action. The reports were presented by the students themselves at a range of different forums including parents' evenings, governing body meetings, student council meetings, internal TV broadcasts to tutor groups, staff meetings and also to special interest groups who had a particular stake in the area that had been researched.

In two of the research areas the recommendations had substantial and immediate impact: the school's assessment and profiling system has changed in ways which explicitly acknowledged the *Students as Researchers* work; and members of the school council now have an entitlement to a range of training and support which acknowledges the demanding nature of their role. The recommendations of the group looking

at student experience of trainee teachers were taken up by the school, but they were unable to persuade their university partners to adopt them, at least in the first instance. Now, some two years later, the school has returned to those recommendations and, as I indicate later in the paper, the suggestion that students and trainee teachers establish mutually supportive and demanding dialogic encounters looking at students' experience of teaching and learning has been incorporated in a pilot scheme with six trainee teachers and twenty two students.

#### *Year 2 (1997–1998)*

Year 2 involved a slightly larger cohort of students and saw a range of interesting internal developments. Some students chose to continue their work as student researchers operating in a similar mode as in Year 1. Others who continued did so as Student Consultants offering support and advice to the new research groups, but not getting involved on a regular basis with the collection of data and other practical aspects of the research process. Those students who continued their involvement also helped in the design of the training day and played key roles at various points in the day itself.

The topics researched were more wide-ranging. Again three groups emerged, this time looking at aspects of careers education, the quality of school meals and the life skills programme. The data gathering became more sophisticated, more varied and more imaginative, often seeking to raise awareness of the *Students as Researchers* work through the methods of data collection themselves.

As in Year 1, the impact of all three research groups was visible and significant. The most far-reaching and most radical was the research and recommendations of the life skills group. In essence the students were saying three things. Firstly, they were puzzled as to why the school insisted that all tutors had to teach the life skills programme which included issues like adolescent sexuality and drug education. It was clear that a significant number of staff were embarrassed and thus ill-equipped to teach areas with particular sensitivities involved. Students felt embarrassed on their behalf and suggested greater involvement of external or highly motivated and trained people at particular points, including older students at the school. Secondly, they highlighted an overdidactic, rather monochrome pedagogy that gave students little room to use IT skills or get involved in more active and engaging forms of learning. Lastly, and most radically, they challenged the whole model of curriculum that underpins current thinking and practice in the UK. What they were advocating was not a longer list of topics to choose from; rather they were arguing for a move

away from curriculum as delivery to curriculum as the joint making of meaning. Whilst recognising the necessity of teacher perspectives and priorities informing the programme they nonetheless urged the school to acknowledge and incorporate their perspectives as students; a negotiated curriculum and a negotiated pedagogy seemed to them to make more sense as we approach the new century.

The quality of the research and the elegance and strength of the students' advocacy, particularly at a substantial presentation to staff on a professional development day, has led to profound changes in the life skills curriculum. Even more remarkably and more radically, not only did the curriculum and its attendant pedagogies undergo significant change, the group monitoring and evaluating the impact of the new provision includes three students. As I shall argue later, what we are witnessing here are profound cultural and structural changes in the professional identity and working practices of a large, very successful secondary comprehensive school, changes that are student-led and sustained by the richness and attentiveness of a dialogic culture.

#### *Year 3 (1998–1999)*

Year 3 has seen an extension of the Student Consultant role, four research groups have been operating, one of which consists solely of Year 9 students (13 years old). The research methods continue to extend their repertoire and there is much more contact with other schools, both in the UK and abroad. The video-conferencing links with Canada and the regional networking which were established in Year 2 have been extended to include presentations at a number of national conferences, including one at the DFES (UK ministry of education). International visitors have led to successful research bids in other countries including, most recently, a three year research project funded by FONDYCET in Chile using student researchers as the key agents in the development of pedagogies and curriculum materials dedicated to the development of education in and for democracy (Fielding & Prieto 2000; Prieto 2001).

#### RADICAL CHALLENGE: THE EMERGENCE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL ISSUES AND INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

Inevitably an initiative of this kind raises a huge number of issues which have to do both with the uneven daily realities of innovation and the nurturing of a sympathetic professional culture to sustain it. Among these

there are some that are particularly challenging and push hard at the boundaries of our current traditions and practices, three of which seem to me particularly compelling. The first has to do with issues surrounding the relationship between the cultures and structures of institutional development; the second has to do with the possibility and desirability of what I shall call a 'radical collegiality' between students and teachers; and the third has to do with the usefulness or otherwise of a 'transversal' approach to student voice which runs parallel with the recent emergence of transversal politics (Cockburn & Hunter, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1999).

#### *The Emergence of New Organizational Structures*

One of the most interesting things about the *Students as Researchers* project which looked at the life skills programme in the school lies not only in the depth and quality of the challenge it posed to contemporary curriculum orthodoxy, both in the school and more widely in the UK context. It also lies in the fact that the richness of its work and the manifest quality of its insights and recommendations led to the emergence of new organizational structures which incorporated students as equal partners in the process of curriculum renewal. My own feeling is that whilst the quality of the work of that particular student research group was responsible for much of the force of its transformative momentum, it was the cumulative presence and power of the *Students as Researchers* work as a whole that prompted the radical incorporation of students on the team monitoring and evaluating the new life skills programme.

In this instance at any rate, structural change seems to have followed from cultural changes in attitudes to students, changes brought about through the students' capacity both to demonstrate the quality of their research and to identify and articulate insights into curriculum practices and curriculum models in ways which were not forthcoming from teaching staff. New structures that have the power to invite and retain commitment seem more likely to arise from transformative practices (in this case led by students) that gradually generate a cumulative authenticity and robustness over time. Because the assumptions and values which shape the form and texture of their daily reality are differently configured to prevailing school norms, they have difficulty finding a place within existing organizational arrangements and new forms arise to accommodate and further their development.

#### *Radical Collegiality*

The second set of challenging issues I should like to highlight from the *Students as Researchers* work at Sharnbrook push us to consider not just

the double fact that students see different issues and see issues differently, but also the fact that the nature of teaching in schools is such that a professionalism adequate to our needs in the twenty-first century must incorporate a much more overt openness and reciprocity indicative of a much more flexible, dialogic form of democratic practice. In other words, contemporary teacher professionalism needs to incorporate an expectation that teacher learning is both enabled and enhanced by dialogic encounters with their students in which the interdependent nature of teaching and learning and the shared responsibility for its success is made explicit.

These issues were raised in embryonic form by the research group looking at student experience of trainee teachers in Year 1, but, as I indicated earlier, the school was not able to gain the support from the universities involved. Interestingly, this year (Year 3) has seen a successful pilot involving six trainee teachers and twenty two students, six mentors, and two other experienced members of staff. Each trainee teacher worked with three students across the ability range from one of their classes (though in the case of an advanced level Biology group of 16- to 18-year-olds the pilot involved the whole class of eight students). I worked separately with each constituency (students, trainees and mentors) before running a joint session in which possible approaches to data collection and a common set of values and understandings were established. The ensuing work proved very fruitful and initial evidence suggests that the two research questions, (a) 'Is trainee teacher professional development enhanced by reciprocal dialogic encounter with students about the quality of teaching and learning?' and (b) 'Is student participation in this initiative supportive of their own metacognitive growth?' could both be answered very positively.

What we have here is a concrete instantiation of what I have elsewhere called 'radical collegiality' (Fielding, 1999), a collegiality constitutive of a professionalism commensurate with the move towards a more dialogic form of democracy. Here teachers learn not only with and from each other, from parents and from their community, but also, and more particularly, from their students.

#### *Transversal Politics and the Possibility of an Inclusive Emancipatory Community*

One of the most difficult conceptual and practical issues confronting many societies across the world today concerns the development of an inclusive, emancipatory community. How, on the one hand, do we avoid the totalizing tendencies of modernist accounts of community and on the other hand avoid the shifting anomie of its post-modern counterpart? Recent



feminist approaches to bringing together those from warring or diametrically opposed groupings (for example in Palestine, Bosnia and Northern Ireland) points to the possibility of a transversal politics in which difference is acknowledged and valued in ways which neither embrace a false consensus nor dissipate and fragment the possibility of genuinely shared understandings and joint action. In the words of Cockburn and Hunter, transversal politics “is a tolerance of distinctiveness which is at the same time an intolerance of non-communication. Metaphorically and actually this means multi-lingualism” (Cockburn & Hunter, 1999, p. 91). What a transversal approach seems to require is, firstly, a robust understanding of the differences involved; secondly, a set of egalitarian values and dispositions which are both respectful and acknowledging of the legitimacy of those differences; and thirdly, a sense that the experience of dialogic encounter and the engagement of joint work begin to open up new understandings and insights. These in turn generate a new and interesting sense of practical and hopeful possibilities that nurture a genuinely inclusive sense of community in which each cares for the other reciprocally.

Much of the work emerging at Sharnbrook seems to have a transversal quality to it. Thus, as demonstrated in Table I below, the values and principles which form such a central part of the training of the student researchers and the staff supporting them is set out in dialogic form with the student perspective on the left hand side and the staff perspective on the right. The power and potential of the project lies in the open acknowledgement of the legitimacy of both perspectives and in the necessity of their reciprocally conditioning joint pursuit. Each depends on both the acknowledged legitimacy of difference and the manifest reciprocity of its articulation for its practical energy and its creative drive.

A second example of a dialogic or transversal approach to student voice typical of the *Students as Researchers* initiative can be seen in its approach to communication. Considerable care was taken not only to communicate with fellow students about the conduct and outcomes of the research, but to use as many occasions as possible to learn with and from staff. Thus, some of the most fruitful phases of the research work have involved student researchers running workshops about their work-in-progress on staff professional development days or in staff meetings of various kinds. Here the approach has been to share current work, not in the sense of the traditional unidirectional (and usually sterile) dissemination, but rather to articulate puzzles and problems as well as delights. These are occasions in which all participants are involved in creating new knowledge and doing so together: the resonance and productiveness of the sessions depends on the degree to which the dialogic encounter instantiates the reciprocally

TABLE I  
Students as researchers: principles & values

---

<b>Partnership</b>	
* Look at issues identified by students	* Look at issues identified by staff
* Respect the validity of student perspectives	* Respect the professionalism of teachers
* Use existing expertise of students	* Use existing expertise of staff
<b>Positive Orientation</b>	
* Improvement through involvement	* Share and extend good practice
* Enhance communication between + students and students	* Enhance communication between + staff and staff
+ students and staff	+ staff and students
<b>Centrality of Learning</b>	
* Enhance learning of <i>all</i> students about + researching key issues	* Enhance the learning of <i>all</i> staff about + researching key issues
+ discussing and acting on research findings	+ discussing and acting on research findings
+ further developing the school as a learning community	+ further developing the school as learning community
+ staff as learners	+ student potential
<b>Equity &amp; Authenticity</b>	
* Involve a range of students	* Involve a range of staff
* Student contributions valued equally + by each other	* Staff contributions valued equally + by each other
+ by staff	+ by students
<b>Quality Assurance</b>	
* Rigorous preparation of <i>Student Researchers</i>	* Awareness raising and engagement with staff
<b>From Reflection to Action</b>	
* Link to action / change + students acknowledge their part in the shared responsibility	* Link to action / change + staff acknowledge their part in the shared responsibility
* Share research findings with relevant people	* Share research findings with relevant people
+ students + staff + governors + parents + community	

---

conditioning principles of freedom and equality which are constitutive of emancipatory community (Fielding, 2000).

#### THE NEED TO ADDRESS WIDER CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

The *Students as Researchers* initiative at Sharnbrook offers much that is hopeful, brave and creative in times that are increasingly disfigured by the deeply dull and destructive discourse of performativity which continues to be such a substantial flaw in the UK government's approach to education. It nonetheless has a very long way to go, and properly so. One of the reasons it is such a worthwhile development is its capacity to help us see what some of the key issues are if we are to make progress in a field which has stagnated for some time. Drawing on some very interesting parallel or complementary research in Australia (Atweh et al., 1998; Groundwater-Smith, 1999), North America (Bartfai & Webb-Dempsey, 1997; Bryant et al., 1997; Campbell et al., 1994; Egan-Robertson & Bloome, 1998; Garcia et al., 1995; Goldman & Newman, 1998; Kushman, 1997; Kranendonk & Quilling, 1996; Lincoln, 1993, 1995; NCSLEA, 1994; Nieto, 1994; Oldfather, 1995; Soo-Hoo, 1993, 1995; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998; Thiessen, 1997) South America (Fielding & Prieto 2000; Prieto 2001) and the UK (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Connolly, 1997; Doherty, 1997; Duffield & Allan, 1999; Fielding, 1998, 2001; Fielding et al., 1999; MacBeath, 1998, 1999a,b; Pickering, 1997; Rafferty, 1997; Rudduck et al., 1996; Wetherill, 1998) I would suggest two sets of issues that have conceptual as well as practical resonance: the first has to do with understanding more clearly and more acutely what conditions are most likely to foster student voice as a transformative force rather than as an unwitting adjunct to the increasingly irrelevant and pernicious paradigm of school effectiveness.

#### *Evaluating the Conditions for Student Voice*

In Table II below I set out nine clusters of questions which arise out of the *Students as Researchers* initiative and which seem to me to apply equally well to any set of arrangements which seek to move more closely and more authentically to a practice of dialogic democracy. The questions themselves concern speaking, listening, attitudes, systems, spaces, action and the future and, with the exception of the last set, together enable us to apply a simple but searching interrogatory framework to arrangements and practices which seek to both acknowledge and promote student voice.

TABLE II

Evaluating the conditions for student voice

---

Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Who</i> is allowed to speak?</li> <li>• <i>To whom</i> are they allowed to speak?</li> <li>• <i>What</i> are they allowed to speak about?</li> <li>• What <i>language</i> is encouraged / allowed?</li> <li>• <i>Who decides</i> the answer to these questions?</li> <li>• <i>How</i> are those decisions made?</li> <li>• <i>How, when, where, to whom and how often</i> are those decisions communicated?</li> </ul>
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Who</i> is listening?</li> <li>• <i>Why</i> are they listening?</li> <li>• <i>How</i> are they listening?</li> </ul>
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the skills of dialogue <i>encouraged and supported</i> through training or other appropriate means?</li> <li>• Are those skills understood, developed and practised within the <i>context of democratic values and dispositions</i>?</li> <li>• Are those skills themselves <i>transformed</i> by those values and dispositions?</li> </ul>
Attitudes & Dispositions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do those involved <i>regard each other</i>?</li> <li>• To what degree are the <i>principle of equal value</i> and the <i>dispositions of care</i> felt reciprocally and demonstrated through the reality of daily encounter?</li> </ul>
Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How often</i> does dialogue and encounter in which student voice is centrally important occur?</li> <li>• <i>Who decides</i>?</li> <li>• How do the systems enshrining the value and necessity of student voice mesh with or <i>relate to other organizational arrangements</i> (particularly those involving adults)?</li> </ul>
Organizational Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the <i>cultural norms and values</i> of the school proclaim the centrality of student voice within the context of education as a shared responsibility and shared achievement?</li> <li>• Do the <i>practices, traditions and routine daily encounters</i> demonstrate values supportive of student voice?</li> </ul>
Spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Where</i> are the public spaces (physical and metaphorical) in which these encounters might take place?</li> </ul>

---

TABLE II

Continued

---

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who <i>controls</i> them?</li> <li>• What <i>values</i> shape their being and their use?</li> </ul>
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What <i>action</i> is taken?</li> <li>• Who feels <i>responsible</i>?</li> <li>• <i>What happens</i> if aspirations and good intentions are not realized?</li> </ul>
The Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do we need <i>new structures</i>?</li> <li>• Do we need <i>new ways of relating to each other</i>?</li> </ul>

---

### *Towards an Intellectual Framework for Student Involvement*

A second set of issues arising from the *Students as Researchers* work at Sharnbrook and its companion international initiatives elsewhere help us to take a further step back from questions about the most propitious conditions for student voice and invite us to reconceive what is meant by student involvement. Student voice and student involvement have become increasingly vogue issues, yet we remain a good deal less clear about what is meant by them than we ought to be and, equally worrying, even less clear whose purposes are served by their current valorization.

Building in particular on the fine work of Douglas Barnes et al in the late 1980s with their closed, framed and negotiated characterization of teaching styles (Barnes et al, 1987), on Dennis Thiessen's stimulating triadic framework for configuring educational research and the involvement of young people (Thiessen, 1997), and on the incisive conceptual mapping of both Roger Hart (Hart, 1992) and Mary John (John, 1996), I suggest a four-fold model which distinguishes between students as sources of data, students as active respondents, students as co-researchers, and students as researchers.

Table III(a) below takes those categories and works through what they might mean with regard to rationale, kinds of knowledge used, engagement with students, student role and, lastly, the process of making meaning.

Table III(b) then seeks to apply the four categories at micro, meso and macro levels, giving examples of what each might look like in classrooms, departments/teams, and whole school contexts.

Although each of the four levels and kinds of student involvement are characterized by distinctive assumptions and modes of operation, initiatives and practices are likely to move in and out of the different modes.

TABLE III

Levels of student (pupil) involvement in school self review &amp; school improvement

Students as <b>DATA SOURCE</b>	Students as <b>ACTIVE RESPONDENTS</b>	Students as <b>CO- RESEARCHERS</b>	Students as <b>RESEARCHERS</b>
(a) rationale & engagement			
<b>Rationale</b> Teachers need to know about students' prior learning / perceptions of their learning in order to teach effectively	<b>Rationale</b> Teachers need to engage students in order to fully enhance both teaching and learning	<b>Rationale</b> Teachers need to engage students as partners in learning in order to deepen understanding and learning	<b>Rationale</b> Students need to engage with their teachers and peers in order to deepen understanding and learning
<b>What Kind of Knowledge is Used</b> Knowing about student performance and attitudes towards learning	<b>What Kind of Knowledge is Used</b> Knowing how students learn	<b>What Kind of Knowledge is Used</b> Knowing what students might be able to contribute to deepen understanding	<b>What Kind of Knowledge is Used</b> Knowing what teachers and peers might be able to contribute to deepen understanding
<b>How Teachers Engage with Students</b> Acknowledging	<b>How Teachers Engage with Students</b> Hearing	<b>How Teachers Engage with Students</b> Listening in order to learn	<b>How Teachers Engage with Students</b> Listening in order to contribute
<b>Student Role</b> Recipients	<b>Student Role</b> Discussants	<b>Student Role</b> Co-Researchers	<b>Student Role</b> Initiators
<b>How Meaning is Made</b> Dissemination	<b>How Meaning is Made</b> Discussion	<b>How Meaning is Made</b> Dialogue (teacher led)	<b>How Meaning is Made</b> Dialogue (student led)
(b) Classroom (pedagogy), Department / Team, School			
<b>Classroom</b> e.g. • data about student past performance	<b>Classroom</b> e.g. • shared lesson objectives  • explicit assessment criteria	<b>Classroom</b> e.g. • feedback techniques on pedagogy (teacher led) • developing metacognition	<b>Classroom</b> e.g. • feedback techniques on pedagogy (student led) • developing metacognition & shared responsibility for learning
<b>Department / Team</b> e.g. • looking at samples of student work	<b>Department / Team</b> e.g. • department agenda based on student perception data / suggested by pupils	<b>Department / Team</b> e.g. • students co-research aspects of pedagogy / learning with teacher	<b>Department / Team</b> e.g. • students run session for staff on how to engage with particular learning styles

TABLE III

Continued

Students as <b>DATA SOURCE</b>	Students as <b>ACTIVE RESPONDENTS</b>	Students as <b>CO- RESEARCHERS</b>	Students as <b>RESEARCHERS</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● teacher-led action research (ask students for feedback)</li> <li>● pupils involved in evaluation of unit of work</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● student suggestions for new units of work</li> </ul>
<b>School</b> e.g.	<b>School</b> e.g.	<b>School</b> e.g.	<b>School</b> e.g.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● student attitude surveys</li> <li>● exam &amp; test performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● school student council</li> <li>● peer-led action groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● students support school-based action research by staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● student led review of life skills programme</li> </ul>

Different levels and modes will be appropriate at different times and in different contexts. Whilst this flexibility and variation is quite proper, it is, in any case, inevitable in my own view that the 'students as researchers' mode is linked to a set of assumptions and values that are preferable to the other three levels and that its mode of being offers a set of aspirations which are worthy of our energies and our support. *Students as Researchers* valorizes and extends a transformative notion of education at the heart of which lies the commitment to teaching and learning as a genuinely shared responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

The intellectual and practical motif which most readily captures both the values and alternative practices exemplified in the *Students as Researchers* initiative is that of mutuality, of education as both a shared responsibility and a shared achievement predicated on the dispositions and demanding realities of dialogic encounter. What is both exciting and daunting about *Students as Researchers* is the way in which it both clarifies issues that are central to the development of a dialogic learning community (whether it be a school or some other kind of human practice) and the way it insists on a response to fundamental questions those issues throw up. The issues to which I am referring are at the heart, not only of what it means to be a citizen, but also of what it means to be and become a person. They have

to do with both the intellectual and practical challenge of articulating what an inclusive educational community might look and feel like. Central to such a project are issues to do with power and authority, freedom and equality, and, as important and necessary as each of these, the dispositions and values of democratic living without which democracy itself becomes a mere mechanism that more often than we would wish turns out to betray the very aspirations that inspire its inception.

*Students as Researchers* is potentially as creative and important as it is demanding, if only because it has within it the possibility of helping us to make a practical and theoretical leap of grounded imagination that takes seriously Raoul Vaneigem's insistence that 'A minute correction to the essential is more important than a hundred new accessories' (Vaneigem, nd, p. 5).<sup>4</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The paper is offered as a suggestive interplay between empirical enquiry and theoretical exploration. It is neither a fully substantiated case study, nor a predominantly intellectual endeavour. Inevitably, such a hybrid runs the risk of irritating more than it stimulates, since there is always so much more to be said. My thanks to the reviewer who chastised me on just these grounds. Whilst I am unrepentant, I remain apprehensive: border crossing is hard to do.

<sup>2</sup> This was (and is) a research and development project in which I worked alongside students and staff as well as with them. The 'we' referred to here was the deputy principal, Louise Raymond, myself and two other members of the teaching staff, Robin Caudell, and Tania Cooksey. In subsequent years the core team supporting the student researchers has varied. It has included non-teaching staff, a part-time school-based researcher, and student consultants i.e. students who had experience of the initiative in previous years, but who for reasons of time subsequently wished to support student research, rather than continue to be involved in fieldwork.

<sup>3</sup> I am very aware of the dangers alluded to in Note 1 above. A more extensive description of the *Students as Researchers* work at Sharnbrook would inevitably, and perhaps most interestingly, explore the areas of conflict, disagreement and plain puzzlement that an initiative of this sort must encounter. The author is currently working on a fuller account and would be happy to be in touch with interested readers. The *Students as Researchers* initiative at Sharnbrook and its development in other UK schools is central to two strands of the current major ESRC (Economic & Social Research Council) Network Project *Consulting Pupils About Teaching & Learning*.

<sup>4</sup> *Students as Researchers* has become a significant part of Sharnbrook Upper School's approach to curriculum renewal. This year (2000/2001) it involves around 90 students and 14 staff. See Raymond 2001 for an overview and exploration of the current international upsurge of interest in student voice.



## REFERENCES

- Alcoff, L. (1991/2). The problem of speaking for others. *Cultural Critique* **20** Winter, 5–32.
- Atweh, B. & Burton, L. (1995). Students as researchers: Rationale and critique. *British Educational Research Journal* **21**(5), 561–575.
- Atweh, B., Christensen, C. & Dornan, L. (1998). Students as action researchers. In B. Atweh, S. Kemmis & P. Weeks (eds), *Action Research in Practice: Partnership for Social Justice in Education* (pp. 114–138). London: Routledge.
- Barnes, D., Johnson, G., Jordan, S., Layton, D., Medway, P. & Yeomans, D. (1987). *The TVEI Curriculum 14–16: An Interim Report Based on Case Studies in Twelve Schools*. University of Leeds: School of Education.
- Bartfai, N. & Webb-Dempsey, J. (1997). *Students as Researchers: Research from the Inside-Out, Reform from the Bottom Up*. Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, 14 pp.
- Bryant, C., Lee, L.E. & Levin, B. (1997). *Developing Student Voice: A Follow-Up Study with Students as Researchers*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, 7 pp.
- Cockburn, C. & Hunter, L. (1999). Transversal politics and translating practices. *Soundings* **12** Summer, 89–93.
- Campbell, P., Edgar, S. & Halsted, A. (1994). Students as evaluators. *Phi Delta Kappan* **76**(2) October, 160–165.
- Connolly, P. (1997). In search of authenticity: Researching young children's perspectives. In A. Pollard, D. Thiessen & A. Filer (eds), *Children and Their Curriculum* pp. 162–183. London: Falmer Press.
- Doherty, P. (1997). Engaging students on the margins in educational research. *Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties* **2**(3) Winter, 45–49.
- Duffield, J. & Allan, J. (1999). The learner's voice in raising an LEA's achievement strategy. *Management in Education* **13**(5), 21–23.
- Egan-Robertson, A. & Bloome, D. (1998). *Students as Researchers of Culture & Language in Their Own Communities*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Fielding, M. (1989). Liberte, egalite, fraternite – ou la mort: Towards a new paradigm for the comprehensive school. In H. Lauder & P. Brown, (eds), *Education: In Search of a Future?* Lewes: Falmer Press.
- Fielding, M. (1998). *Students as Researchers: From Data Source to Significant Voice*. Paper presented at the 11th Congress for School Effectiveness & Improvement, University of Manchester, UK 4–7 January 16pp.
- Fielding, M. (1999). Radical collegiality: Affirming teaching as an inclusive professional practice. *Australian Educational Researcher* **26**(2), 1–34.
- Fielding, M. (2000). Community, philosophy and education policy: Against the immiseration of contemporary schooling. *Journal of Education Policy* **15**(4), 397–415.
- Fielding, M. (2001 forthcoming). Beyond the rhetoric of student voice: New departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling? *Forum* **43**(2).
- Fielding, M., Fuller, A. & Loose, T. (1999). Taking pupil perspectives seriously: The central place of pupil voice in primary school improvement. In G. Southworth & P. Lincoln (eds), *Supporting Improving Primary Schools* (pp. 107–121). London: Falmer.
- Fielding, M. & Prieto, M. (2000). Investigando con Estudiantes: Una Experiencia de Practica Democrática Paideia **28** pp. 105–128.

- Garcia, F., Kilgore, J., Rodriguez, P. & Thomas, S. (1995). 'It's like having a metal detector at the door': A conversation with students about voice. *Theory into Practice* **34**(2) Spring, 138–144.
- Goldman, G. & Newman, J.B. (1998). *Empowering Students to Transform Schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Groundwater-Smith, S. (1999). *Students as Researchers and the 'Why' Question*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, University of Sussex, 11 pp.
- Hart, R.A. (1992). *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship. Innocent Essays No. 4*. Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.
- Humphries, B. (1994). Empowerment and social research: Elements of an analytic framework. In B. Humphries & C. Truman (eds), *Rethinking Social Research: Anti-discriminatory Approaches in Research Methodology* (pp. 185–204). Aldershot: Avebury.
- John, M. (1996). Voicing: Research and practice with the silenced. In M. John (ed), *Children in Charge: The Child's Right to a Fair Hearing* (pp. 3–24). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Kushman, J.W. (1997). *Look Who's Talking Now: Student Views of Learning in Restructuring Schools*. Portland, Or: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Kranendonk, H. & Quilling, M. (1996). *An Urban District Student Survey Process where Secondary Students were the Primary Researchers*. Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 24 pp.
- Lincoln, Y (1993). I and thou: Method, voice, and roles in research with the silenced. In D. McLaughlin & W.G. Tierney (eds), *Naming Silenced Lives* (pp. 9–27). New York: Routledge.
- Lincoln, Y. (1995). In search of students' voices. *Theory into Practice* **34**(2) Spring, pp. 88–93.
- MacBeath, J. (1998). Just think about it. *Times Educational Supplement* **18** April, 13.
- MacBeath, J. (1999a). *Schools Must Speak for Themselves*. London: Routledge.
- MacBeath, J. (1999b). *Students Speak for Themselves*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, University of Sussex, 13 pp.
- National Center for Service Learning in Early Adolescence (1994). *Student Evaluators: A Guide to Implementation*. New York: National Center for Service Learning in Early Adolescence.
- Nieto, S. (1994). Lessons from students on creating a chance to dream. *Harvard Educational Review* **64**(4) Winter, 392–426.
- Oldfather, P. (1995). Songs 'come back most to them': Students' experiences as researchers. *Theory into Practice* **34**(2) Spring, 131–137.
- Pickering, J. (1997). *Involving Pupils*. SIN (School Improvement Network) Research Matters No. 6 Spring London: University of London Institute of Education, 8 pp.
- Prieto, M. (2001 forthcoming). Students as agents of democratic renewal in Chile. *Forum* **43**(2).
- Rafferty, S. (1997). *Giving Children a Voice: What Next? A Study from One Primary School*. Spotlights No. 65 Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Research in Education, 6 pp.
- Raymond, L. (2001 forthcoming). Student involvement in school improvement: From data source to significant voice. *Forum* **43**(2).
- Rudduck, J., Chaplin, R. & Wallace, G. (eds) (1996). *School Improvement: What Can Pupils Tell Us?* London: Fulton.

- Soo-Hoo, S. (1993). Students as partners in research and restructuring schools. *Educational Forum* 57 Summer, 386–393.
- Soo-Hoo, S. (1995). Emerging student & teacher voices. In B. Kanpol & P. McLaren (eds), *Critical Multiculturalism* (pp. 217–234). Westport, Conn: Bergin & Garvey.
- Steinberg, S. & Kincheloe, J. (eds) (1998). *Students as Researchers*. London: Falmer.
- Thiessen, D. (1997). Knowing about, acting on behalf of, and working with primary pupils' perspectives: Three levels of engagement with research. In A. Pollard, D. Thiessen & A. Filer (eds), *Children and Their Curriculum* (pp. 184–196). London: Falmer Press.
- Wetherill, L. (1998). The 'Students as Researchers' project at Sharnbrook Upper School & Community College. *Improving Schools* 1(2), 52–53.
- Vaneigem, R. (nd). *The Revolution of Everyday Life – Part One*.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1999). What is 'transversal politics'? *Soundings* 12 Summer, 94–98.

#### AUTHOR'S BIO

Michael Fielding is Reader in Education at the University of Sussex Institute of Education. A lifelong advocate of democratic comprehensive education, his current research is concerned with student voice and The articulation of more humanly fulfilling alternatives to the moribund frameworks of school effectiveness.

MICHAEL FIELDING  
*Institute of Education*  
*University of Sussex*  
*Falmer*  
*Brighton BN1 9RG*  
*UK*  
*E-mail: m.fielding@sussex.ac.uk*

