

# Incorporating student voices into education systems



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“...language is the primary technology of communication.”

Winch *et al.* , 2004

## **6. 1 Introduction to the Discussion**

This chapter uses its space to develop some of the issues raised by the research that has gone into the dissertation. If it is contentious, it is in order to ask questions about issues where the answers are not yet available, and develop a deeper understanding of the concepts. This includes:

- the reality of Student Voice as a supported and integrated concept, rather than as a manipulated concept for integration
- the validation of alternative education as an ideal place for Student Voice
- the questions of Partnerships and how this is being politically channelled whilst not perhaps given the strength of foundation it deserves and needs

## **6. 2 Student Voice: Integration for Learning or Integration for Policy**

As the dissertation showed, there are strong theoretical underpinnings for the value of incorporating Student Voice into educational systems, especially when seen in a constructivist light. The surprise is that it has taken so long. However, the study has also shown that it is not always as easy as anticipated to re-format a school's approach. There are worries and concerns surrounding the actual reality of adapting an existing system to incorporate Student Voice. There are the teachers concerns of devaluing learning at the cost of social development. There are fears about losing control and upsetting the status quo. On the other hand, there are also those who

embrace the concepts of freedom of learning choice and student contribution.

As Martin, Worrall, and Dutson-Steinfeld (2005) put it, it is now too late to put the lid back on Pandora's Box. The danger is that the tide may follow the easiest path, rather than listening to the voices that are more difficult to hear. Cruddass (2001) argued that these voices may have the greatest contribution to make. After all, if Student Voice is a method of integration, it is surely fairly pointless directing it towards those who already have their avenues for communication and are well entrenched within the system, when those just outside need to be provided with a way in. It perhaps reflects some of the cultural values when it comes to who the system wants to provide a voice for and who it does not.

For the Westernised education systems, changes in the socio-economic climates have brought about a:

... shifting balance of power, caused by information and communications technology and learners access to alternative sources of knowledge, reduced public funding, globalisation and commercial imperatives.

Latchem & Hanna 2001, p. 1

One could perhaps add that as the public funding has gone down, the gap has been filled by an incremental increase in policy documentation and political rhetoric. It seems that the onus is put on the schools to follow the recommendations, and increasingly to fund these demands themselves. That aside, listening to young learners, and understanding what they are

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communicating has most probably been a part of the repertoire of what Haberman (1995) termed *star teachers* long before it become encapsulated in documentation. The discussion is whether the value put on Student Voice is a passing phase or is getting the attention it so richly deserves.

### **6.3 Alternative Education and Student Voice**

This section of the discussion returns to the use of an environmental education format as a means of combining positive communication strategies through the use of different formats, such as a conservation park and school. It has taken some time for alternative educational formats to receive official consideration, and this has demanded a considerable change in mind set. For example, as more people have come to understand the necessity for a complete change with regard to the place of humans in the environment, the ideals of education driven by sustainability have become less the realm of extremists and more the essentials for good sense. If one were to take this a step further, a developed form of education such as that potentially offered by the Park could become less of an alternative, and more of a mainstream consideration. This is one reason that this dissertation has explored the environment as a means of generating attitudes and ‘raising voices’, rather than a questioning of knowledge gained through the Activate Programs.

Using the Park as the example, this study found that the Activate Programs were effective in communicating a positive attitude towards each other based on involvement with a specific environment. Rather than a sense of environmental consideration, there was a sense of connection amongst students to the Park. Although environmental knowledge was not measured, <https://assignbuster.com/incorporating-student-voices-into-education-systems/>

the results of working *in* the environment contributed to the Observational sections that informed some of this dissertation showed changes in awareness.

One of the important factors was the ‘culture’ of familiarity that developed amongst those students who were regulars on the Activate programs. They developed a better understanding of the Park and knew more what to expect when they visited. This meant they not only had different expectations than those less familiar with the Park, but that they started to show a leadership and peer attitude that supported the Activate ethic. This working in the environment system, when designed carefully and driven by the right personalities, appears to strongly support the idea of a more mainstream approach to an ‘outdoor classroom’.

This ‘culture of communication’, as it could be called, aims to be enabling and empowering for students. It not only encourages positive connections to develop between the students and the environment, it also gives them practical opportunities to see what they can do. This is a vitally important point for students from schools where they are all too often given information, but have no way of acting upon it in a positive and constructive way. In the Park, there is the combination of Student Voice as an over-current to the Activate activities. For example, the Lion group consists of some very challenging students who would not normally co-operate together. Yet at the Park, as the following quote shows, they do. There is a continual level of communication that seems to equate to a very different reality to the one found at school:

It is very encouraging to see some of our students in this program and then see how different they are in their behaviour and attitude back in a classroom/school setting. In the classroom they can be the disruptive/troubled student and yet at the Park these same students have been the “ Leaders’ and are willing to help/show and guide new/younger student of this group. At the beginning of our program we had a hard, troubled group but as time evolved they have built relationships and furthered skills they didn’t know they had.

#### Teacher Interview 2006

Expectations were integrated with communication. Where there was insufficient communication between the Park and school staff, false expectations could be generated and this was an area that needed tightening up as it could lead to confusion. However, the outcomes for attitude have been predominantly positive. Not one teacher, student, parent or support staff wanted to see the programs stop and the majority like them as they are.

#### **6. 4 Does Parent Partnership’s Help**

Thanks to the *SEN and Disability Act* (DfES 2001), parents and carers now have avenues that will help them find out the options available for their SEN child. *Parent Partnership Services* (PPS) (see e. g. Worcestershire County Council’s online Parent Partnership Service) are designed to deliver statutory rights including:

.. information, advice and guidance on SEN matters to allow them to make informed decisions about their child's education. PPS can also help prevent difficulties from developing into disagreements.

Rogers *et al.* 2006, p. 1

There are obvious advantages to a partnership approach (Roger *et al.* 2006: Wolfendale 2002: Wolfendale & Cook 1997). It enables a more holistic approach to the students' whole learning experience and thereby includes their social and emotional status as well as the environmental and cognitive. But, as Rogers *et al.* (2006) show in their assessment of PPS, the methodology of integrating PPS still needs work and is highly variable. With regard to this dissertation, the discussion focuses on the positive contribution of parents and carers when they are involved with the student's education at school whilst stopping short of advocating that teacher's lesson plans be available to parents:

Schools should make information available to parents on what they can expect from schools and individual pupils' progress. This might include access to lesson plans and learning materials and should be available as and when parents want to access it.

DfES 2006b, p. 24

If the goal is that of the 'personalised learning' (DfES 2006) currently advocated, with all its emphasis on partnership, then it may well be that teachers will have to re-evaluate what their planning is for. It would seem entirely acceptable, in deed necessary, for parents and carers involved in

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this partnership approach to be well acquainted with what is about to be taught.... yet this sounds more and more like sending the parents back to school themselves. Perhaps the ideal is a school planning document that outlines the curriculum content and its anticipated coverage, subject to curriculum changes of course, that is specifically prepared for community involvement. The fact that Partnership is being advocated above Student Voice perhaps suggests that one format is easier to manage politically than the other. In fact, the following DfES (2006b) Figure 4 shows that pupil voice is more an element of learning an a cognitive descriptive than a part of all-round learning.

These are just three of the issues put forward for discussion and it is anticipated that much more work will be done on these in the future.

## **7 CONCLUSION**

This study has been a learning journey in itself. The first thing the study demanded was learning to listen properly to students and not interpret what they were saying by my own standards. The added dimension of the zoological park provided a fascinating contrast with student's styles and types of communication and how they changed at school and at the Park. The following is a brief summary of where we are now and what needs to be considered in the future.

We now know that a democratic system equips students better, be they in a special school or mainstream, for a post educational reality. Part of this democratic system involves the right to speak on one's own behalf and have one's view listened to and, when appropriate, acted up. At its best, Student



Voice works as a means of holistically integrating students in their education. Whilst Student Voice motivates, it also allows and encourages students to take responsibility for their learning. The dissertation has shown that this works at a variety of levels. In the classroom, the study identified some of the strong links between student intrinsic motivation and the power of choice. Where the student is involved in selection and method of learning, they are more likely to become and remain enthusiastic. It should go without saying that it is equally important for SEN students to have these same rights, even if the means of communication are different. This means official support (i. e. funding) is necessary for schools to be able to resource themselves sufficiently to cater for all Student Voices. As discussed, this issue of funding is a particularly thorny one and seems to get hidden beneath the shifting sands of politics, covered with a blanket of rhetoric and Government sponsored research. However, it is a step along the way towards changing ‘mind sets’ towards Student Voice.

There is also the issue of teacher attitudes. Many teachers are more used to being heard and less familiar with the type of listening Student Voice requires. Some find it hard to validate student opinion. Despite all the research done into Student Voice, and the obviously better ‘fit’ it makes in contemporary society, there are still those who are frightened by the change in the status quo, or who’s training has not encompassed this, or who resent more official requirements. In fact, in a contemporary, humanistic and individualised paradigm, it seems increasingly strange that *choice* as a concept does not underpin the UK educational system. Therefore, one of the recommendations for the future has to more professional development for

those teachers that need it. Teacher training itself is constantly subject to change and has the challenge of both preparing students for the reality of working in schools and establishing the current pedagogic approach. For example, it may be hard for a new teacher with a passion for listening to students to adapt to work in a more traditional school setting.

With regard to settings, the dissertation showed that location and environment have a distinct impact on students. This led to the design of a new school which combined both the in-class educational formats and the outdoors activities, be those agricultural, environmental, or simply outside.

In summary, the future of Student Voice and its best use in the UK educational system needs to take into consideration:

- Teacher training and continued support for new and existing teachers through professional development.
- Make the formats for student voice more user-friendly and introduce them professionally – do not expect all schools to be able to adapt their format automatically.
- Finance and long term support.

What lies before us and what lies behind us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us. Oliver Windell Holmes