

Students: From Informants to Co-Researchers ®

Refereed Paper

Australian Association for Research in Education

Annual Conference, Melbourne, November

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Studies centred around the experiences of young people in schools typically position the students as the objects of the research. They are observed, surveyed, measured, interviewed and commented upon in order to inform a research agenda to which they have made little contribution. They are rarely recognised as active agents, who can not only be reliable informants, but also interpreters of their own lives. The positioning of young people in educational research is analogous to that of women within traditional patriarchal research paradigms. They are at worst, silenced; at best patronised. This, in spite of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which stipulates in Article 12 that the views of the child should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (UNICEF, 1989).

The literature suggests that in those cases where there is an enhanced sense of student agency there are three levels of research activity - *knowing about* young people's perspectives; *acting on* the behalf of young people; and *working with* young people's perspectives. There is little evidence of a fourth level, that is *acting with* young people to improve and change their lifeworld conditions.

This paper will examine a rationale for enhanced student agency in research and will cite a number of case studies undertaken by the authors which provide examples of these three levels of research activity. The studies range from engaging students as informants who can provide constructions of the environment which gives social meaning to their lives; to ones in which the students are co-researchers, contributing to the research questions and the manner of their asking. The paper will foreshadow ways in which the fourth level may be achieved by entering into negotiation with students, not only in terms of the research process, but also the ways in which the research outcomes may be used in order to improve some aspects of their schooling and subsequent learning.

The paper recognises the problematics associated with the power differentials between adults in education and students. But it will argue that if students' voices are to become authentic in the research and development cycle then such a differential must be transcended.

Student Engagement in Research:

The notion of engagement is well documented in student learning literature. It is characterised, for example, by Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) as being related to task persistence, cognitive effort, excitement and interest in encountering new ideas. Students who are engaged with their learning are said to exhibit enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity and interest. They are willing to exert intense effort and concentration and will select tasks which challenge and intrigue them. Nystrand and Gamoran (1992) developed a distinction between what they termed *procedural* engagement and *substantive* engagement. The former may be taken to mean day to day participation, while the latter connotes sustained involvement in academic learning.

It is a curious fact, that with all of the research conducted in classrooms students have not been substantively engaged in whichever research processes are used. That is to say, there has not been a "sustained involvement" by students themselves in investigations which will ultimately have consequences for: the ways in which teachers teach; the manner in which the curriculum is designed and enacted; and, the modes of assessment and reporting which will be employed.

Student voices are mediated through researchers' methodologies, be they of a qualitative or quantitative nature; they are filtered through the research design and the interpretative mechanisms employed. In effect they are muted in one way or another. As Alderson (1995) observed in relation to young learners:

If children's views are collected, this is usually in order to atomise and process them through the grid of adult-designed research, from ticking boxes to producing graphs. Very little research is devoted to listening to children at length and seeing how their responses deeply express their individual experience. (p.40)

At best student engagement with research is *procedural* that is to say they are involved to a certain degree by taking the role of informant. Even so, Leonard (1990) notes how rarely researchers have interviewed children or observed them in everyday settings (p.59). In this paper we shall argue the case for moving towards a more *substantive* engagement in research by students where they participate in the design and interpretation of the research. We shall offer examples where student agency has been increased, but falls short of the emancipatory possibilities of full and active participation. Finally, we shall propose a set of principles which could take us forward to such substantive participative engagement.

Rationale:

In developing a rationale for student participation in research we are putting an ethical case. We are arguing that children have a right to be heard (John, 1996). And not only heard, but listened to. The processes require mutuality, respect and transparency. Yet, in almost all institutionalised educational processes there is an inherent power differential which make the realisation of an ethical stance difficult to achieve.

Schools are themselves governed by a number of regulatory constraints, many of which are allied to high stakes assessment, such as the final exit examination, generally conducted to sort and sift students in competition for higher education places. While, admittedly, curriculum frameworks and public examinations are generally determined by the state, teachers are the agents who manage the curriculum, its assessment and pedagogy in their

classrooms. Necessarily, under these conditions they are in greater control of events than their students. However, the exercise of this power is often of an unreflective and habitual kind. It simply does not occur to those with the greatest control, that, at least some of that control can be negotiated and that such negotiation is a healthy practice contributing to the wellbeing of all.

It could be argued that the dominant discourses of schooling, in relation to curriculum, assessment and pedagogy are grounded in psychological, rather than sociological, perspectives. Power differentials between teachers and their students are less often discussed from such a perspective. Students are typically positioned as immature, not yet fully capable children. Their youth and inexperience is cited as justification for granting them little power and authority over their lives; this in spite of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) which stipulates in Article 12 that the views of the child should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child and Article 13 that the child shall have "the right to freedom of expression ... to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds" (Alderson, 1995, p. 70).

This power differential between teachers and their students, as manifested in schools and classrooms, is reflected in the educational research processes themselves. Students are at worst the objects and at best the subjects of the research. They are not seen as participants in the processes of enquiry. Indeed, Morrow and Richards (1996) note that within existing ethical guidelines on human research in medicine, children are considered alongside adults with impairments. In other words, they are not seen to have status, but to be vulnerable. They are characterised as relatively incompetent and at risk of exploitation.

We would argue that the current situation is itself exploitative as students, be they very young or mature, are objectified in the research process, powerless to define its purpose or direction. Walkerdine (1998) reports a study in which she explores the eroticization of young girls.

Janie is six. In the classroom she sits almost silently well behaved; the epitome of the hard working girl, so often scorned as uninteresting in the educational literature on girls' attainment. She says very little and appears to be constantly aware of being watched and herself watches the model that presents to her teacher and classmates, as well as to myself, seated in a corner of the classroom, making an audio recording. She always presents immaculate work and is used to getting very high marks. She asks to go to the toilet and leaves the classroom. As she is wearing a radio microphone I hear her cross the hall (and enter) the silence of the toilets and in there, alone, she sings loudly to herself. I imagine her swaying on front of the mirror. The song she sings is one on the lips of many of the girls at the time I was making the recordings: Toni Basil's "Oh, Mickey"

... In moving out of the public and highly supervised space of the classroom, where she is a "good, well-behaved girl", to the private space of the toilets she (Janie) enters a quite different discursive space, the space of the little Lolita, the sexual little girl, who cannot be revealed in the cosy sanitized classroom. She shifts in this move from innocent to sexual, from virgin to whore, from little child to little woman, from good to bad. (pp. 254 - 255).

While not denying the power of Walkerdine's analysis and discussion arising from this observation, what is of concern here is the covert nature of the research. Janie is an object upon which a microphone is hung. There is no attempt to discuss with her why she sings as

she does and what the words might mean to her. When consent was given for Janie to be involved in Walkerdine's research who gave it and on what grounds?

Much of the ethics argument, discussed by Morrow and Richards (1996) is based upon issues of consent, but the consent is to participate in research projects which are designed with little reference to the subjects themselves. How many human research ethics committees have representation or a mechanism for consulting subjects, in this case students, about research regarding aspects of their lives? None, to our knowledge.

Who best knows what it is to be a student if not the students themselves? Convention and perceptions of lack of civil status means that we fail to see the imperative of engaging students in research which will affect them and their learning. Lansdown (1994) notes that children are structurally vulnerable "because of their total lack of political and economic power and their lack of civil rights (p.35). As Saporiti (1994) observes: "Until children attain adult status, they appear to contribute to society only as diligent receivers" (p. 191).

Alderson (1995) suggests that:

Adults are seen as the real consumers of children's service, from Education and the *Parents' Charter* to child health services. When they ignore children's own views, by default researchers reinforce common prejudices that children do not have view worth hearing. (p.40)

Another restraint, cited by social researchers, is the matter of validity. How valid are the views which young people hold of their experiences? Morrow & Richards (1996) quote a United States researcher who claims that "Discovering what children really know may be *almost* as difficult as learning what our pet kitten really knows; we can't trust the sounds they make" (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988, p.47). The implication is that student self-report is not to be trusted.

The matter of witness and testimony has always been problematic in research, and so it should be. But this is not to argue that one should not to engage in the research at all. And it is certainly no more problematic for children than for adults. In Felman & Laub's (1992) powerful account of testimony in relation to the Holocaust, they make the distinction between being a witness to oneself within the experience, to being a witness to the testimony of others; and, to being a witness to the process of witnessing itself (p. 75). Telling of an experience, they advise us, enhances the knowing of an experience. Further they remind us that the listener's role is also critical; listeners, not as interrogators, but as authentic touchstones for the teller who investigates and renders the truth as he or she knows it.

True, youngsters are often asked to complete self report inventories, with an assumption that they can make observations about their experiences. What they are not trusted to do is to voice those observations in any manner other than that which has been determined by the researcher. Rarely are they consulted regarding the ways in which items are constructed or characterised. Even more rarely are they consulted regarding the interpretation of findings once they have been assembled.

Clearly, there is a case for students to have greater agency in the research process. Particularly this must be so in educational institutions. For it is the student's future which is at stake, more so than their parents or other stakeholders.

Thiessen (1997) has argued, with respect to primary school students, that there are three levels of research activity. These are:

1. *Knowing about students' perspectives;*
2. *Acting on behalf of students' perspectives; and*
3. *Working with students' perspectives. (pp. 184 - 185)*

In the first instance the researcher is concerned with accessing students' perspectives regarding their educational experiences; in the second, the researcher becomes an advocate in the policy development process (a case for this is also argued by Engelbert, 1994, p. 298); while in the third the researcher, as an educational practitioner works with the students to negotiate the conditions of their learning. We would argue for a fourth level of research activity:

4. *Acting with students in partnership, to improve and change their lifeworld conditions*

How then might this level of research be accomplished? We shall cite a suite of studies which we have undertaken which themselves place the students as knowing and sentient actors in their social worlds. We shall argue that through these studies some progress is being made towards a realisation of the fourth level of research activity.

Case Studies:

The first case we present here falls within Level 1. As part of the Curriculum Issues Project (Groundwater-Smith, 1988) an attempt was made to capture something of children's perceptions of the experience of schooling: A small group of children were given simple cameras, film and flash cubes. They were invited to take photographs throughout the school day of experiences and events which moved them. They were then interviewed, the following day, in pairs regarding the meanings they attributed to the photographs. The process was designed to allow for the emergence of multiple interpretations of the same event. A videorecording crew was present throughout the two days. The process allowed the students to determine the significant events for themselves and gave insight into their meaning.

The outcomes certainly assisted in *knowing about* students' perspectives. However, because the purpose of the project was to gather data which would be of value in a pre-service teacher education program there was no provision made to *act* or *work with* those perspectives at the school site.

The second case is one which incorporates both Levels 1 and 2. It is an investigation of children's and parents' discourses about computers in the home and at school and which raises a number of issues in relation to students as informants (Downes, 1998).

As part of a larger multi-method, multi-staged study, Toni Downes investigated children's computing experiences in their schools. The purpose of the whole study was twofold: to make a contribution to the knowledge about and understanding of the "lived" experiences and interactions children have with computers in their homes and schools; and to inform the work of teachers and educators who are seeking to develop programmes using computing technologies within schools. As such, this addressed the first two of Thiessen's (1997) levels of research activity: knowing about students' perspectives and acting on behalf of children's perspectives. The key informants in the study were 450 children between the ages of five to twelve from 14 different school communities.

The study focused on the children's descriptions of their environments, their experiences and their activities. It placed the children at the centre of the inquiry, as both focus and informants. The analysis was framed around the notion of reciprocity where both person and technology were seen as "actors" and "acted upon". Such reciprocity avoided both the techno-centric and socio-centric approaches and rightly attributed to the child the role of "actor".

Two major methodological issues arose out of the use of children as

informants. One related to the belief by some researchers that children possess characteristics that make them different and problematic as informants in research; the other to the use of the school as a site of participation, a site, as we have already noted, where power relations between adults and children are tightly defined and children have little opportunity to negotiate.

Both of these issues were handled in the same way as similar issues are handled with adult informants, or informants where the power differential between researcher and researched may create difficulty (for example, ethnic minorities). Actions to improve the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis were embedded within the notion that all self-accounts are socially constructed, they are mediated through the participants' experiences and are influenced by the setting in which the accounts are told. When reliability checks were considered necessary, they occurred through access to similar data from other children or to different types of data provided by the children.

Issues explored with the children were: access to and use of computers in schools; types of computing activities at school; purposes for using computers at school; and, the rules surrounding their use. Overall the findings indicated that there were strong differences between the intended curriculum and the curriculum these children experienced

A variety of responses also highlighted children's perception of inequitable processes in the allocation of computer time to students in some classrooms: "Some people have had a turn but she always picks the same people"; "The teacher never picks me"; "If we're allowed to use it, everyone else is there before I can get there"; and "If you've finished your work you can use the computer. The faster workers get more turns".

Clearly the children identified and reflected upon issues associated with the power differentials experienced in classrooms. They reported that turns at the computer were conditional on such things as completing classwork, asking the teacher, being chosen by the teacher, waiting until the computer was free, getting there first or waiting for their turn on a roster. Some children noted that access sometimes relied on a teacher's memory: "The teacher just remembers who hasn't had a turn the day before", and "We used to have a list but she's forgotten." Students also noted the tendency for teachers to use the computer as a reward for good behaviour, thus advantaging some students over others: "The teacher picks you if you are good". In many ways, these experiences reinforced children's notions that at school, computers were not really an important part of their learning.

Students' perceptions of why they used computers at school were also at

variance with the rhetoric found in policy documents that computers are to be used in primary schools for the enhancement of teaching and learning. They perceived that they were primarily using computers to learn how to use them and how to use a particular application or program. There was a relationship between the number and type of computing experiences provided in the schools and the students' perceptions of what was being learned. In two schools which offered typing tutorials, learning to type was the most often

mentioned purpose for using computers. In another school, maths programs were being used more frequently and were mentioned more often than in other schools.

By way of contrast, another project (Groundwater-Smith, 1996) undertaken on behalf of the National Schools Network, also sought to know about students' perspectives and built in mechanisms which ensured that those perspectives were recognised and acted upon and therefore incorporated Levels 1 and 2. Students, in a series of primary schools were presented with a range of eight images of teachers. These were selected magazine pictures of male/female, younger/older, Anglo-Celtic/Ethnic persons. Students were asked to nominate their image of a helpful teacher and explain their response. They were then requested to list as many things as they could which demonstrated what teachers do to assist learning. Further questions were asked such as 'How do you know when you have learned something?' 'How does your teacher know?' and 'What other things would you like teachers to do to help you learn?' Students first recorded their own responses and then took part in focus group interviews. To enable younger students to participate senior students acted as their scribes.

The project was particularly noteworthy in that it was an example of facilitated practitioner research (Groundwater-Smith, 1998) whereby the school based practitioners (but not students) were directly involved in gathering and interpreting the data. Once issues were raised, in terms of students' beliefs about ways in which teachers could improve learning experiences, these were taken up immediately in the schools concerned, as well as being disseminated by the National Schools Network. In this way students' perspectives were both known and acted upon.

The 3rd Level, nominated by Thiessen (1997) is where the researchers, as educational practitioners, work with students to negotiate the conditions of their learning. A demonstration of moving towards this level of research activity is to be found in a Canberra High School's study (Stromlo, 1999), *Change Matters*, an Innovation and Best Practice Project (IBPP). Over a four week period all students in Year 7 brainstormed their ideas related to the question 'What is it like to be in Year 7 at S. High School?' Students worked together to compile their responses under seven subheadings: Learning; Assessment; Out of Class Activities; Having a Say; Relationships; Welfare; and, Organisation. From this investigation a sixty item questionnaire was developed. The initial intention had been for the students to participate in the analysis of results and make recommendations regarding the school's policies and practices. While, as a result of time constraints, this latter aspiration was not realised, certain items did generate a great deal of discussion among students and teachers alike. The principal issues were twofold: Year 7 students asserted that they spent too much time listening to their teachers; and, their thoughts and opinions were not as valued as they might be. Although it was recognised that a number of positive reforms had come about in the Middle Years, it was clear that there was additional room for the development of strategies which would involve students more fully in their learning and the conditions under which their learning occurred.

Further promising work is being undertaken with students in a large independent girls' school. Here a year long educational impact study (EIS) is being undertaken, whereby an investigation is underway regarding good conditions for learning and the consequences of current assessment and reporting practices.

It is worth, at this point, briefly discussing the nature of an EIS and why that particular framework was adopted. The purpose for an impact assessment, be it environmental or educational, is to estimate the costs and benefits before the change occurs. Such an estimate is best based upon soundly gathered data, which is gathered following consultation with key stakeholders and in particular students.

Major educational changes are generally planned with improvement in mind. However, an investigation of their impact upon those participating in the change needs to take account, not only of the potential for beneficial outcomes, but also the possibility of unwanted problems. An educational impact study (EIS) is fundamental to decision making about the ways in which change is planned and implemented.

A number of data gathering strategies are being employed in the EIS including students interviewing school leaders regarding their definitions of good learning and their concerns regarding assessment and reporting practices. Undoubtedly, this is an example of a far greater involvement of students beyond being informants.

It should also be noted that the EIS regularly discusses its work with a school based research advisory committee which, in turn, has strong student representation. As Groundwater-Smith (1999) has recently reported, students on the committee are proactively engaged with the research.

Rica and Andrea are Year 8 and Year 9 students, respectively, at a large independent girls' school located in metropolitan Sydney. They are members of the school's Research Advisory Committee, along with three other students. In order to join the committee the students, all members of the Student Representative Council, had submitted an expression of interest which set out their commitment to being participative in providing advice and insight into research matters designed to contribute to ongoing school improvement.

At the most recent meeting of the advisory committee, which also has staff and parent representation, an interim research report outlining the activities for the first half of the year was tabled and discussed. Two particular items were of interest. One was that a student survey indicated that while students appreciated that the school had a policy of differentiating learning and was seeking for higher levels of student autonomy, students themselves had a strong preference for teacher centred instruction. The second finding arose from interviews and focus group discussions with parents and school leaders which suggested that students should take greater responsibility in contributing to the assessment and reporting of their progress.

During the discussion of the student survey Rica quietly referred to the notes that she had made on the report. She spoke up and indicated that she had talked to a number of Year 8 students about the survey and why they seemed "set against" student independence. The general view seemed to be that students thought the strategy was a ploy to reduce teacher work; and that "independence is all very well, but you need to be taught how to be independent and not just left to it". Rica went on to suggest that as part of the ongoing research cycle some time should be spent investigating what students understand independent learning to mean; and how they think they might be assisted in becoming more autonomous.

After reading the findings regarding assessment and reporting, as perceived by school leaders and parents, there was a vigorous affirmation that students should be more involved in self-reporting. Andrea let the discussion run its course and then leant forward and asked "why?". Suddenly, what had seemed so transparent and self-evident that it required little justification, became problematic. Andrea had rendered the notion of "self-reporting" critical. While she appeared reasonably convinced by arguments regarding the

benefits of meta-cognition she also insisted that there was little awareness among her fellow students that being able to describe their own learning and set goals for its improvement would actually contribute to cognitive development. "It's alright for you to think it's good for them; but do they think so. It sounds like a lot of work, will it be worth it?" Andrea recommended that if we were to follow Rica's suggestions, then asking questions about self reporting could also be included in the ongoing research.

An outcome of the meeting has been that there is now an opportunity to act with young people to investigate and improve the nature of their learning. This outcome has come about as a direct result of student engagement in the actual research processes themselves. (pp. 1-2)

This brings us to the fourth level of student engagement with research: *Acting with students in partnership, to improve and change their lifeworld conditions*. Although both Fielding (1999) and Rudduck (1999) have cited some powerful examples of student led research in the UK, our investigation of the literature has shown us that research of this kind remains a rarity. We would hope that such engagement would be conducted under conditions where students have an equal voice in determining the research questions, in selecting the methodology, in interpreting the results, and in proposing improvements to practice. Along with families, educational institutions are our most comprehensive and fundamental means for improving our students' life world conditions, not only in the immediate present but also in their futures .

To this end, we outline a series of principles which we believe can move educational research forward to Level 4.

Principles for Substantive Participative Engagement in Research by Students:

1. The purposes of the research should be in the best interests of the students;
2. The purposes of the research should be transparent and consented to by all key stakeholders, including students;
3. The research should be respectful of the students' definitions of the phenomena being examined and incorporate methodologies which allow for varying levels of literacy and oracy;
4. Students should be active in providing input and advice regarding the initiation and design of the research;
5. Students either directly, or by representation, should be partners in the research's enactment and interpretation;
6. Students should have a voice in determining the implications of the research for appropriate educational policies and practices
7. Students should be enabled, by provision of appropriate resources (such as time, space, technologies and materials) to be fully participative in the research; and
8. Throughout the research, sensitivity should be accorded to the ethical maxim of *ēdo no harmí*.

Conclusion:

We are mindful of the fact that merely citing principles of practice in no way guarantees such principles will be observed. Actualising the principles is the difficult matter. We are asking for nothing less than a coalition between researchers and students, a coalition whose formation will produce an authentic witness to the experiences of students by stepping with them into their places and spaces. Oliver Sachs (1995), in his introduction to *An Anthropologist on Mars* cites G.K. Chesterton:

Science is a grand thing when you can get it; in its real sense one of the grandest things in the world. But what do these men (sic) mean, nine times out of ten when they use it nowadays?... They mean getting *outside* a man and studying him as if he were a gigantic insect; in what they would call a dry impartial light; in what I would call a dead and dehumanized light. They mean getting a long way off him, as if he were a distant prehistoric monster... When a scientist talks about a type, he never means himself, but always his neighbour; probably his poorer neighbour. I don't deny the dry light may sometimes do good; though in one sense it's the very reverse of science. So far from being knowledge, it's actually suppression of what we know. ... It's like saying that a man has a proboscis between the eyes, or that he falls down in a fit of insensibility once every twenty-four hours. ...I don't try to get outside the man. I try to get inside (p.xv)

We, too, argue that if we are truly attached to the enterprise of improving the conditions of living and learning for young people then it is not merely a matter of whim and choice that we work closely with them. It is essential that we engage with them; and they engage, in turn, with our mutually constructed research in the substantive ways we have outlined here.

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