

*Student Voice's Experiences for the Teacher
Development an Analysis of Best Practice Guidelines*

Noelia Ceballos López, University of Cantabria, Spain
Ángela Saiz Linares, University of Cantabria, Spain

The European Conference on Education 2014
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Based on the idea of inclusive education, a lot of initiatives are being carried out in order to improve the presence, participation or success of students at school, paying special attention to those who due to gender, age, ability or ethnicity traditionally have been marginalized, silenced and have suffered a process of "disempowerment" (Fielding, 2011; Messiou, 2012; Susinos and Ceballos, 2012).

In this context, the movement of student voice invites us to ask who has the power in schools and how they use it, what Bernstein calls "acoustic school" (2000). The experiences of student voice seek to create spaces for dialogue and deliberation to make changes in schools taking into account the thoughts of students. This is based on the conviction that all students are agents with the ability and knowledge to transform, regardless of their characteristics (Rudduck and Flutter, 2007; Fielding, 2011; Fielding and Moss, 2012).

In this paper, we present the conclusions of the review of good practice guides of student voice. These guides are the results drawn from different international research studies. In particular, we will reflect upon the transformations experienced by schools, teachers and students as a result of their participation in improvement projects. We will also analyse the main barriers and supports of participation which condition the beginning and sustaining of these educational experiences whose motor of change is student voice.

Keywords: Student voice, good practices, transformation, participation

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction and some theoretical pointers

Inclusive education has been placed as a priority on the international agenda (Ainscow and Miles, 2008). To this end, different projects and initiatives (learning communities, collaborative groups, peer support, etc.) have been implemented that seek to overcome the inequalities of presence, success or participation experienced by students in schools, especially those who have usually been excluded. It is in this search for a new, more inclusive pedagogy where the student voice movement is to be found, and although originating in countries such as England, Canada or the U.S. it has spread to countries with less tradition therewith.

When we use the term "student voice" we use it as a metaphor, as an image to indicate the urgency of recognizing the right to participate and engage students, on equal terms, in the life of the school and their learning. In short, the experiences of student voice have as their main purpose to expand the spaces of student participation in all aspects of school life understanding that their ideas, thoughts and suggestions are excellent drivers of change and educational transformation (Rudduck and Flutter, 2007). We find then that placing the ideas and thoughts of students at the centre of discussions and dialogues on teaching and learning, involves rethinking how power is distributed in schools, who owns it and what use is made of it, what Bernstein calls "school acoustics". Thus, students are no longer viewed as passive learning agents, but to become seen as agents with the ability and knowledge to reflect on their life in schools and suggest improvements (Rudduck and Flutter, 2007; Fielding, 2011).

It also means building spaces where students can feel safe to think, speak or express themselves – in other words, building schools where the voice of all students has its own space and is considered an authoritative one in education and transformation (Arnaiz, 2004, Susinos, 2009). In this sense, the pedagogy of voice pays special attention to students who due to gender, age, ability or ethnicity, have traditionally been marginalized, silenced and have experienced a constant process of "disempowerment" (Fielding, 2011; Messiou, 2012; Susinos and Ceballos, 2012).

In short, we are seeing the start of a complex and idiosyncratic way of redefining relationships between adults and young persons, as well as ways of organizing the school culture (Fielding, 2011). It is in these reflections on relationships, curriculum or school organization that provides honest listening to the voice of all students where we build more inclusive and democratic schools that are setting out on the path towards becoming spaces that welcome all students (Ainscow, 2001; Sapon-Shevin, 1999).

However, as occurs with other major educational concepts, on occasions we find under this term of student voice experiences of various and even contradictory kinds. Therefore, it is necessary to specify the pillars and principles on which they are founded; the main steps for the development of these experiences; and to analyse the main barriers and supports that schools find in this process. To this end, the documentation and dissemination of successful and innovative student voice experiences may be useful. This is the ultimate purpose of the doctoral thesis¹ upon

1 Noelia Ceballos Lopez: Analysis of experiences of participation and student voice in the Autonomous Community of Cantabria Good practice for initial and ongoing training. Director: Teresa Susinos Rada Project funded by the call for FPI (2012-2016)

which this communication is framed, to develop a good practice guide, the fruit of documenting experiences of student voice that serve to launch initiatives that honestly listen to the voice of the students.

In this paper we make a first approach to this purpose, analysing different materials and already existing resources and which can be consulted teachers as a support for the implementation of student voice experiences. Specifically, we will pause to analyse what main barriers we encounter when we seek to expand the opportunities for dialogue. We will examine some actions or processes that are positioned as levers of change for its development. Finally, we will look at the main changes and transformations experienced by schools, teachers and students who have participated in them.

We believe that the analysis of these aspects in the materials, can give us relevant reflections, not in order to transport the suggestions and experiences from one context to another as a copy, but rather as reflections that can become tools for analysing experiences that are currently developed in schools or as supports for the implementation of new initiatives to build schools of radical democracy where the voice of the students is considered as a powerful tool for improving teaching and educational change.

Methodology

Initially, we conducted a literature search in which we obtained eleven materials and / or resources on student voice. Once we had this initial sample at our disposal, we conducted a preliminary analysis that allowed us to select the resources noted below as a sample of our work. For their selection we focused primarily on the criteria of belonging to the object of study, accessibility and relevance of authors in the field. While we are aware that they represent only a limited sample, we believe that with this sample we can meet our goals:

- Fielding, M and Bragg, S (2003) *Students as Researchers. Making a difference.* Cambridge: Pearson
 - MacBeth, J; Demetriou, H, Rudduck, J. and Myers, K (2003): *Consulting Pupils. A toolkit for teachers.* Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.
 - Arnot, M. McIntyre, D; Pedder, D; Reay, D (2004): *Consultation in the classroom. Developing dialogue about teaching and learning.*
 - Fletcher (2005) *Meaningful Student Involvement. Guide to students as partners in school change. Second edition.* Available at <http://www.soundout.org/series.html> (last accessed on October 13, 2013)
 - Fletcher (2005) *Meaningful Student Involvement. Guide to inclusive school change.* Available at <http://www.soundout.org/series.html> (last accessed on October 13, 2013)
 - Fletcher (2005) *Meaningful Student Involvement Stories.* Available at <http://www.soundout.org/series.html> (last accessed on October 13, 2013)
 - NASUWT teachers union (2011): *STUDENT VOICE: a guide to promoting and supporting good practice in schools.* Available at
-

http://centrallobby.politicshome.com/fileadmin/epolitix/stakeholders/Student_Voice__web_ready_.pdf (last accessed on October 13, 2013)

- Llywodraeth Cymru Welsh Government (2011) Pupil Participation-good Practice Guide. Available at <http://www.pupilvoicewales.org.uk/uploads/publications/540.pdf> (last accessed on October 13, 2013)

After selecting our sample, we conducted a detailed analysis of such materials by subjecting them to a process of categorization. The categories used respond to a deductive-inductive method commonly used in qualitative research and always with the clear intention of never losing the essence of the discourses (Tójar, 2006).

Although we performed a comprehensive analysis process, below we pause to analyse the results of three of these categories:

- transformations, improvements and changes experienced by schools, teachers and students as a result of their participation in student voice projects;
- barriers, i.e., statements and examples of issues that hinder and/or limit participation and student voice.
- and finally, supports, i.e. aspects that favour the initiation and maintenance of these experiences.

Results

Here, we present the main results obtained from the analysis of resources and materials related to student voice listed above. We focus on three aspects: the transformations and changes that schools, students and teachers have experienced in the development of these experiences; the main barriers they found to their development and finally, aspects that have encouraged and helped their development. One of the core aspects when schools decide to initiate a process of increasing participation and student voice is to know to what extent and how these initiatives represent a change and transformation in the life of schools. As regards this topic we should note that not all the guides provide a section on it, although it is present in all in the development of the text.

- In terms of the students we discover that the materials, through the expansion of opportunities for dialogue and joint decision-making, highlight that they develop a more positive conception about themselves and their capabilities (Fielding and Bragg, 2003) conception. Even those students who are negatively valued in school for their academic performance or behaviour improve their self-image by observing that their opinions and ideas are listened to and valued as being relevant and that they have greater control over their learning. This change in roles of teachers and students as well as increased recognition of the students represents a change in the relationship between these students and in turn with teachers (Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Fletcher, 2005; Llywodraeth, 2011) towards more positive interaction modes. Similarly, this encourages students to develop listening skills, communication and negotiation skills as well as learning to develop a way of building knowledge from the pillars of research (Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Llywodraeth, 2011) allowing them to be more active and creative in their learning.
- However, the transformations are experienced not only by students but also by teachers. This is not simply because an improvement in relations with their

students occurs, as noted above (Fletcher, 2005; Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Llywodraeth, 2011) but because these experiences are transformed into excellent tools for training and improvement in teaching (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). So, reflecting on the ideas that students put forward on the processes of teaching and learning, teachers can rethink their teaching practices and experiment with new strategies based on from more positive and more competent student perceptions of them (Fielding and Bragg, 2003).

- These improvements in students and teachers spread, in turn, to changes in the school culture. Mainly, redistributing power between adults and students without exception including favours the creation of more inclusive democratic educational communities (Llywodraeth, 2011). This in turn leads to a change in school learning culture where students and teachers learn and teach together (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). These changes therefore enable us to analyse the actions and educational processes currently taking place and to seek new conceptions of learning, so that openness to new ideas and ways of developing intergenerational work (Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Fletcher, 2005) become key to the identity of the school.

It has been stated previously that schools, students and teachers experience significant improvements towards shaping a more inclusive and democratic school. Nevertheless, we should not convey the image that profound changes such as these do not involve a process of care and effort to overcome certain barriers. Below, we illustrate the processes and actions that these materials see as the main barriers and upon which we must reflect.

- The first of the recognized barriers is the absence of safe spaces where students can express their ideas without understanding that there is adult control that expects a single correct answer (Fletcher, 2005a). Not only is it essential to create these spaces, we must do so without manipulation. For example, a barrier to genuine participation is the attempt by some teachers to transfer *their* concerns as the object of the *students'* research regardless of their students' interests (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). Even more so, teachers may understand that these processes respond to activities that are parallel to the curriculum, without modifying it in essence (MacBeth, Demetriou, Rudduck, Myers, 2003)
- What is common in schools, especially in secondary education in Spain, is the use of engagement strategies based on representation. While by itself, the use of this channel is not negative, it sometimes poses a barrier if the channels of communication between students are not open or do not work in both directions (Llywodraeth, 2011). Similarly, as Fletcher (2005b) points out, the way in which students representatives are chosen can also constitute a barrier, because that selection is usually made by adults who tend to select the most talented academically. This in turn gives rise to a feeling of non-representation of the rest of the students. Similarly, we must take careful that students who possess communication skills and leadership do not take ownership of the spaces for participation because it would limit the involvement of the rest (Fielding and Bragg, 2003; MacBeth, Demetriou, Rudduck, Myers, 2003).
- Finally, although highly relevant, we find that careful and honest listening to student voice should conclude with the implementation of some of their suggestions for improvement. Just ignoring them sends out a message of disinterest and represents a barrier to future participation (Fielding and Bragg,

2003). There may be various reasons why suggestions are not carried out, but one of them, as the materials analysed indicate, resides in the fact that these initiatives do not have the school management support (Fletcher, 2005a).

Just as sometimes the school culture of schools is a barrier there are also processes or actions that become a support, a resource for the initiation and maintenance of student voice initiatives. The materials and resources analysed present some supports that schools have at their disposal:

- A key support is the development in students and teachers of skills for decision-making, deliberation and respectful dialogue. While there are students and teachers, who naturally possess knowledge of these strategies, training in such skills is an essential element of support in a democratic and inclusive culture (Llywodraeth, 2011).
- Similarly, when students begin to talk, gather information, investigate and make proposals for improvement, finding resources that students can develop becomes a support for these processes. Some of these are materials (photocopies, a room, etc.) but others are more organizational resources (Fielding and Bragg, 2003) such as where to find space and time to build trust relationships between students and teachers since it is necessary to procure time to be able to talk and to get to know each other.
- It is also positive on occasions to create opportunities for the teachers and students who have participated to share the learning experiences with others who wish to start working with student voice pedagogics (Fielding and Bragg, 2003).

Conclusions

In this paper, we present the main results obtained from the analysis of different materials on student voice, focussing, from a critical standpoint, on three topics. Firstly, we identify the changes and transformations undergone by schools, teachers and students with these initiatives. Secondly, we analyse some of the barriers that schools come up against. Thirdly, we examine the elements that support the initiation of change. From this analysis we can conclude that opting to increase the opportunities for student participation, placing students as expert witnesses of what happens in schools, and as drivers of change in them, supports the addressing of changes in the ways to relating with each other and organization. We hope we have been able to indicate some of these elements in this work.

References

- Ainscow, M. (2001). *Desarrollo de escuelas inclusivas*. Madrid: Narcea.
- Ainscow M. y Miles, S. (2008). Por una educación para todos que sea inclusiva: ¿Hacia dónde vamos ahora? *Perspectivas*, 38(1).
- Arnaiz, P. (2004). La educación inclusiva: dilemas y desafíos. *Revista Educación, Desarrollo y Diversidad* 7 (2), 25-40.
- Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield publishers.
- Fielding, M. & Bragg, S. (2003). *Students as researchers. Making a difference*. Cambridge: Pearson Pub.
- Fielding, M. (2011). La voz del alumnado y la inclusión educativa: una aproximación democrática radical para el aprendizaje intergeneracional. *Revista Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado*, 70 (25,1), 31-61.
- Messiou, K (2012). *Confronting marginalisation in education. A framework for promoting inclusion*. London: Routledge.
- Sapon-Shevin, M (1999). *Because we can change the world : a practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive classroom communities*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon
- Susinos, T (2009). Escuchar para compartir. Reconociendo la autoridad del alumnado en el proyecto de una escuela inclusiva. *Revista de Educación*, 349, 119-136
- Susinos, T. y Ceballos, N. (2012). Voz del alumnado y presencia participativa en la vida escolar. *Apuntes para una cartografía de la voz del alumnado en la mejora educativa*. *Revista de educación* 359, 24-44.
- Tójar, J. C. (2006). *Investigación cualitativa. Comprender y actuar*. Madrid: La Muralla.

Contact email: noelia.ceballos@unican.es