FORUM

Spaces for Partnerships.
Teach the Teacher: student-led
professional development for teachers

ROGER HOLDSWORTH

ABSTRACT Students and schools struggle to create recognised spaces within which partnership dialogues about learning and teaching can occur. This reduces the roles of students and their school organisations to either complainants or organisers of marginal activities. Students in Victoria, Australia have initiated a 'Teach the Teacher' program, in which students lead a process of teacher professional development around classroom or whole-school issues of concern that are identified by students. While the program is in the early stages of dissemination within secondary schools, there are promising responses from schools, and there is some indication of influences upon both learning practices and roles of student councils. Initial reflections identify the role of productive and collaborative questioning, teacher recognition of the value of authentic discussions with students, and the location of such a program in relation to state education guidelines as important factors to consider.

Back in 2001, *FORUM* published a special issue around 'student voice' (*FORUM*, 43[2]). In the final article of that issue, Michael Fielding (the editor of the issue) posed a set of important questions (Fielding, 2001); these were also reflected in an article that he and Jane McGregor presented in Montreal in 2005, within nine 'interrogative sites' (Fielding & McGregor, 2005). These questions resonated strongly with our practices in challenging the often limited and limiting nature of student participatory and student voice practices in Australia. In particular, questions about speaking ('who is allowed to speak?' and 'about what?') and listening ('who is listening?', 'why?' and 'how?' and, as a teacher reminded us, 'what are they hearing?') became challenges to tokenistic practices.

But a further 'interrogative site' has often been overlooked, and this has belatedly emerged for more important consideration in our initiatives: 'spaces

and the making of meaning'. We were asked: 'where are the public spaces (physical and metaphorical) in which these encounters might take place?' (Fielding, 2001; Fielding & McGregor, 2005).

As the discussions about student voice have developed, and have been seen to encompass a range of ways in which authentic partnerships between students and teachers might occur (Fielding, 2012a), we need to be re-asking the questions about the structural conditions for such partnerships within schools and systems. While there has been some progress in developing and documenting a range of student participation practices and in recognising the value of individual classroom discussions, students (and schools) have struggled to find the spaces where these larger cooperative and reflective planning discussions could happen – and to ensure that these spaces are inclusive of the voices and participation of a wide range of students.

In fact, students are still seldom invited or allowed into spaces where they can create or even participate in dialogue about learning and teaching. Even where students and their organisations are recognised and valued by school leadership and asked for their views, there remain assumptions that circumscribe those invitations: it is assumed that students will be asked about 'student issues' (lockers, toilets, uniforms and so on), rather than the vital issues of their learning, school structures, assessment, teaching approaches, groupings and so on. Culturally excluded from the spaces in which learning and teaching are discussed, student organisations have created their own spaces around issues and actions such as fundraising, socials etc – spaces over which they are encouraged to exert some agency, and where they can experience some success, but spaces that exist on the margins of schools' priorities.

We re-ask Fielding and McGregor's questions: 'Where are the public spaces, both physical and metaphorical, in which authentic encounters between students and teachers can occur around learning and teaching? Who controls these? What values shape their being and their use?'

A recent student-led initiative in Victoria, Australia, has begun to address these questions in promising ways. These practices are also beginning to raise other questions about the implications for student voice within the 'allowed spaces' of public policy. This article describes the initial steps, mentions some of the broader implications and, hopefully, lays the basis for a deeper analysis of such approaches in the future.

Background

Most secondary schools in Victoria (Australia) have some form of representative student organisation (as, in fact, do many primary schools), with a range of titles: Student Representative Councils (SRCs), Student Leadership Groups, Student Forums, Student Voice and so on. However, practices within these organisations vary enormously, with many struggling for legitimacy in the eyes of both students and teachers, and most consigned to symbolic or constrained roles. For many years, there have been attempts to develop these groups as more

authentic, democratic, inclusive and effective voices advocating for students within schools.

Recently, these attempts have been locally focused through the VicSRC (see http://www.vicsrc.org.au). The VicSRC is the state level peak body of secondary school student councils in Victoria. It has been in existence for about a decade as an independent, student-run organisation that aims to support the development of student councils in schools and to represent student views to government, the Department of Education and other groups. For the last few years, it has been funded by the Victorian Government's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) to carry out its program of development and representation, and supported in this work by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic).

The VicSRC organises and offers regional conferences and training events for Student Council members, publishes resources (such as its SRC Kit *Represent!*), provides awards to SRCs, liaises with and lobbies various bodies, and sits on various consultative committees, mainly within the DEECD. It has an annual conference of secondary school students (called Congress) that discusses and debates education issues and directions, and that decides priorities for the organisation's work for the next 12 months. At Congress, a Student Executive of 15 secondary school students (years 7 to 11) is elected by peers to manage the organisation and implement resolutions agreed by Congress.

At the 2011 VicSRC Congress, a proposal for a 'Teach the Teacher' program was put forward, workshopped, debated in a formal session, and endorsed by students: 'That the VicSRC should establish a "teach the teacher" training course for individual SRCs to enact at their schools around the way students learn'. This proposal arose from concerns about the nature of relationships between students and teachers within classrooms, and student awareness that 'students have different learning needs and students understand best how they learn. If teachers understand this, students will learn better' (Ponari & Amat, 2012, p. 4).

Program Development

Two VicSRC Executive members took on this resolution as their portfolio for 2011-12. They decided that the most appropriate developmental approach was to implement such practices in their own schools, reflect on what was learnt, and then suggest replication elsewhere through publication of a 'manual'.

The courses happened first at Melbourne Girls' College in 2011 and then at Bundoora Secondary College in 2012, where students pitched the idea of Teach the Teacher to their receptive school leaderships. Students then began to explore a process through which discussions between students and teachers about issues of concern could occur. The students started by forming their views about the priority areas to be addressed. This happened within Student Council (SRC) meetings, prompted by the VicSRC Executive members. After defining the areas of interest, students then researched student attitudes to these areas

69

and collected questions from other students about them, sometimes through casual discussion, and sometimes through formal surveys. These questions then formed the basis for an after-school discussion between about 20-30 students and the teaching staff.

From this, the students wrote up the process as a 'manual' that other students and their student organisations could use to lead their own discussions within their schools.

> The 'training course' has become a series of in-school 'professional development' sessions where students and teachers work together to address issues in the classroom as well as how students learn. It involves both students and teachers working together to find a solution to classroom and school issues that affect students' learning and the ways in which they learn. (Ponari & Amat, 2012, p. 4)

This manual has been published on the VicSRC website as part of its continuing resource development program called *Represent! Plus*.

The Teach the Teacher Process

While specific practices respond to a school's circumstances and needs ('The best part of this program is seeing how each group of students puts their own individual spin on how they deliver the program so that it is unique to their school' [Seddon, 2013]), the Teach the Teacher manual suggests some common steps. In essence, the process is as follows:

1. Students propose the process of Teach the Teacher to the school's leadership (the principal). Agreement is reached and a time frame is established.
2. Students brainstorm and decide on topics or areas to be addressed. This often occurs at an SRC meeting, but sometimes the areas are suggested and decided in association with teachers, arising from whole-school priorities and concerns. However, these topics must be endorsed by students as being of particular concern to them.
3. The core group of students collects information from other students about these issues. This includes student views about practices but, more importantly, suggestions for questions that they wish to ask and discuss with teachers. Sometimes students organise formal surveys (often online) to find out students' views and questions.
4. The core group then sorts and prioritises these questions. In some cases, they discuss appropriate ways to pose questions in order to have a productive dialogue (see later in this article).
5. Students then invite the participation of teachers in a professional development session and set dates and a location for this. The session has often been timetabled within the school's staff meeting schedules.
6. Students undergo 'training' or preparation for their conduct of this session. This includes use of approaches to small-group facilitation, awareness of

body language and seating patterns around tables, ice-breaking techniques, and role-plays of various possible situations.

7. The students then conduct such a session with staff. This usually involves a student introduction with statement of intentions, some warm-up activities, then small-group discussions of students and teachers around the questions – with teachers or students recording the discussion.

8. Students follow up the session by reporting to staff, the SRC and sometimes assemblies of students. In some cases, there is a subsequent student-led session that focuses on practical suggestions for changes, leading to staff and student commitments to try some of these in classrooms and report back. Further Teach the Teacher sessions are planned, including a repeat of the process involving teachers generating questions for discussion with students.

Policy Context

The Teach the Teacher process has found fertile ground within the current policy climate in Victoria. The VicSRC was supported in 2013 to support the extension of the program to ten further secondary schools, and has been encouraged to incorporate such support into its ongoing core work.

The VicSRC Coordinator reported on some of the diverse approaches in 2013:

> At McClelland Secondary College, SRC Science captains are using
> *Teach the Teacher* to provide feedback to their Science teachers on
> what students most enjoy about the Science curriculum. Students and
> teachers are working together to create the best Science lesson
> possible.
>
> At Bentleigh Secondary College, students are using the results from
> the *Attitudes to Schools Survey* to inform the questions they will ask
> their teachers during their *Teach the Teacher* session. (Seddon, 2013,
> p. 17)

The program has been developed within the context of, though not specifically in response to, recent Australian and Victorian policy documents. These policies provide their own metaphorical space for 'student voice'. However, the policies also have their own understanding of these ideas, and hence carry implications into practice.

Student voice is seen first of all, and perhaps predominantly, as student feedback, particularly in a climate in which schools are being pressured to improve short-term learning outcomes. Student feedback is therefore seen as a mechanism for improving teacher practice. A recent policy document, *Towards Victoria as a Learning Community* (DEECD, 2012), identifies the importance of the following aspects:

> Reporting on student learning progress: incorporates student
> reflection on their learning ... Evidence increasingly shows that

> effective feedback loops between students, teachers, school leaders, parents and system leaders are the most powerful force for improved teaching and learning… Just as important as peer-to-peer feedback, is that teachers seek and respond to student feedback. (DEECD, 2012, pp. 10-11)

A broader policy position is taken in a slightly earlier document, *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools* (DEECD, 2009), in which student engagement, voice and participation in shared decision-making are linked to improved student outcomes:

> A Student Engagement Policy will be most effective when it focuses on … encouraging student participation and student voice. (DEECD, 2009, p. 10)

> Encouraging active and meaningful student participation and providing all students with opportunities to contribute and provide feedback to the school and the classroom, ensure that students feel valued and empowered. Giving students a voice is 'not simply about the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it is about having the power to influence change' (West, 2004 [as cited – but it should be Durrant, 2005; RH]) … By providing opportunities and encouragement for all students to participate in the development of the Student Engagement Policy, schools will promote active student participation and provide students with a sense of ownership of their environment … Effective schools and teachers actively seek student feedback and involve students in classroom and school improvement processes. (DEECD, 2009, p. 12)

Finally, at a national level, educational policy is encased within the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), which commits all systems to long-term goals. Though student voice is not explicitly mentioned, the goals include the following, which are directly linked to agency and participation:

> *Goal 2*: All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens [who] … embrace opportunities, make rational and informed decisions about their own lives and accept responsibility for their own actions … [and are] committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia's civic life… (MCEETYA, 2008, pp. 8-9)

Explicitly and implicitly, commitments to active student voice and participation run through these policy positions. In particular, the rhetoric of 'feedback' within school and teacher improvement is being highlighted within official processes – and this now includes student feedback as well as peer feedback.

These commitments are not without their own dangers, of course, and these will be briefly discussed below.

School Responses

Within the spaces provided by these policies, the Teach the Teacher program has had a positive response from many teachers and principals and from the Department of Education. Apart from the pressures of central 'improvement' policy, with the associated concerns about 'performativity', there exists genuine concern within many schools about their own practices. Annual data collection from teachers, parents and students has enabled schools to not only look at student 'performance' but also monitor issues about whether students feel inspired, engaged, safe, challenged and so on. The analysis of these data has raised concerns to which schools have struggled to respond. Teach the Teacher is starting to be seen as one way in which they might explore these concerns collaboratively with students.

To date, the program has operated within supportive schools and where there is a strong commitment from the school leadership. At one school, the principal and deputy principal reported:

> The students at the centre of this initiative – a group called Student Voice – identify their purpose as '*building student voice in their school*'. They aim for teachers and students to work together to improve relationships and learning and teaching; they say: '*we are trying to change things so that learning is better for everyone*'. (Clayton & Doherty, 2013)

They then outlined the support provided for the students' initiatives:

> Parallel with the students' initiatives, the Principal presented to all teaching staff about the context of this initiative. This included background material on the intentions and benefits of enhanced student voice, and the connection of this to the students' initiatives. The staff was strongly engaged, asking questions and responding thoughtfully ... From this session, the teachers also became fully aware that the students would be facilitating a Professional Learning session ... The Principal also outlined the Student Voice project in the school's newsletter, as well as keeping School Council up to date, so that the whole school community had an understanding of what was evolving through the project and what this meant for the students. (Clayton & Doherty, 2013)

While responses from most teachers in the schools where students have organised Teach the Teacher sessions have been positive, a few teachers have found the process confronting and have even avoided participation in student-led sessions. Some other teachers have responded in limited ways, focusing on the novelty and 'surprising competence' of student-led discussions; a challenge

will be to move beyond these superficial responses to shared consideration of issues for change. Student groups will continue to lead these slow but realistic discussions:

> At the same time, the group will begin to plan a further Professional Learning session with staff. They will look at the first session's information in more detail, analyse it and feed this back to staff with a focus on the questions: 'Is there an issue that came out strongly? Are there ideas that can be worked through with students? What action could students and teachers take together to improve this area?' (Clayton & Doherty, 2013)

Some of the schools have decided to include Teach the Teacher approaches and sessions into their regular meeting and professional development schedules. And as information about Teach the Teacher has spread, further schools have shown enthusiasm to take up the approach; some enquired during 2013 about possibilities for participation in 2014, even without any guarantee of central support.

Reflections

The Teach the Teacher approach seems to be providing students and schools with an official and organised space for dialogue about learning and teaching. The VicSRC has described it as providing:

> a space for students and teachers to have a facilitated discussion about the issues that affect their learning and work environment. The program provides a mechanism for students to provide feedback to their teachers, while providing opportunities to work together to identify areas of teaching and learning that could be developed together. (Seddon, 2013)

The existing examples are currently being documented and analysed, and an initial evaluation is being carried out. At this stage, the focus is on a formative evaluation that will uncover any concerns about implementation and assist the program to operate more effectively within schools.

Already we are realising that the nature and wording of the questions that focus the student–teacher discussions are vital. Initially students identified issues that angered them and wanted to ask confrontational questions: 'why don't you respect us?' Other students questioned whether such approaches would be appropriate – and feared perhaps that they (and the process) would be the loser from any such antagonism. So they workshopped how the same issues and concerns could be raised, but in ways that would enable sharing of solutions. The movement in language from 'Why do/don't you…?' or 'Can I …?' to one in which students asked: 'How can we …?' marked a shift from a language of blame and demand to one of mutuality. Interestingly, it has not only been students who have needed to adjust their language; teachers, when initiating

questions for discussion with students, also resorted to 'blame and demand': 'Why do you need to bring mobile phones to class? Is it really imperative that you know of your friends' movements from one class to the next? Can't it wait until recess or lunch?'

For those Student Councils taking on the initiation and implementation of Teach the Teacher within their school, there has been an encouraging shift in focus from involvement in marginal activities to having an authentic role in learning and teaching. The nature of a 'mechanism' or structured program has provided and legitimated the concept of (and rationale for) that involvement. Such Student Councils may not have totally abandoned their previous activities, but they have then been forced to look at structures through which a 'balanced' approach to representation can be implemented; they have set up 'social justice' subgroups to handle fundraising, or taken on advocacy roles for students' needs through different channels. Some have established a separate 'Student Voice' group, to work alongside the Student Council around learning and teaching, using this approach. These measures have also enabled much larger numbers of students to be involved, with one secondary college now reporting the active participation of over 200 students in various forms of 'student voice' initiatives and a reinvigoration of 'belief' among students in their agency.

The existence of the program has encouraged schools to provide time and support for students to investigate the issues of concern. This has involved, at a minimum, discussion amongst the students before they enter into the professional development sessions, but has also usually enabled them to survey other students, collect a diversity of views and debate their own perspectives. Rather than expecting 'student voice' around learning and teaching to come naturally, 'off the top of their heads', Teach the Teacher has encouraged deeper reflection and investigation.

However, Teach the Teacher is playing in a dangerous environment – one in which limited notions of 'student voice' become divisive and contradictory. In a policy atmosphere that encourages schools to judge teachers' performance, particularly around promotion opportunities, there is a real danger that 'student feedback' could be reduced to a formula that is used for non-collaborative purposes. Such approaches already exist in the form of websites that encourage students to publicly and anonymously 'rate your teacher'. 'Student feedback' concepts of student voice, if implemented in such isolated ways, may serve to further separate and antagonise the roles of students and teachers within schools, and act against forms of partnership. Hence there is also strong value in establishing a cooperative and productive approach that brings students and teachers together in discussions that are aimed at improvement of practices, and where 'we' have joint responsibility for implementation.

As Fielding has noted, the spaces for student voice are not value-free. They are located within assumptions about the purposes of education and society:

What these emerging concerns point to is a series of underlying questions, not just about the successes and difficulties of student

voice in the second decade of the 21st century, but also about
fundamental purposes eg What is all this activity for? Whose
interests does it serve? Is student voice a neutral technology or an
inevitable expression of a set of values and assumptions, not just
about teaching and learning, but about the kind of society we wish
to live in? My own view is that student voice is inevitably and
properly saturated by values: it cannot be neutral and to suggest
otherwise is either a profound mistake or a convenient subterfuge.
(Fielding, 2012b)

These values then shape the spaces within which Teach the Teacher occurs. It
has been important that students continue to define and lead these spaces, but
also that they are encouraged to do so because schools and systems value young
people's roles – both within the school and within the wider society. The
young people who initiate Teach the Teacher conversations do so not to have
their input regarded as a source of data for others' use, but because they want to
share in decisions about the purpose and nature of their education.

Future Directions

The Teach the Teacher program is only in its beginning stage. With continued
documentation, reflection and analysis, we will be able to assess its influence on
practices and relationships. The program started with student concerns about
classroom relationships between students and teachers – and a strong awareness
that such relationships heavily affect their learning.

Some students who have been involved remain ambivalent about whether
they have made any difference so far. Nathan and Rory from Year 9 at one
school wrote:

The teachers seemed to really enjoy the session, because they gave
some of the groups' members good feedback in the days after.
Maybe the discussion won't change the way teachers teach, but we
think that teachers might now look at teaching a little bit differently
– after all, students are the best critics. (Nathan & Rory, 2013)

In other schools, there are already reports of changes to classroom and school
practices. We need to assess whether such changes have made classrooms more
cooperative spaces and whether they have provided that space for building
ongoing partnerships.

The staff at the school are getting more used to the idea of Teach
the Teacher and are feeling more comfortable with the process –
some even look forward to it. The next challenge is to be able to
show that the process can produce beneficial and measurable
outcomes. (Pretlove, 2013)

References

Clayton, K. & Doherty, S. (2013) A Middle-years Student Voice Team Leads Teach the Teacher, *Connect*, 201, 11-13.
http://research.acer.edu.au/connect/vol2013/iss201/

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Victoria – Flagship Strategies Division (2012) *Towards Victoria as a Learning Community.* Melbourne: State of Victoria.
http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/learningcommunity.pdf

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Victoria – Student Wellbeing and Support Unit (2009) *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools.* Melbourne: State of Victoria.
http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/stuman/wellbeing/segpolicy.pdf

Durrant, J. (2005) Editorial: the recurring theme of voice, *The Enquirer*, Spring, 5.
http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/education/education-leadership-school-improvement/cantarnet/docs/spring-05.pdf

Fielding, M. (2001) Beyond the Rhetoric of Student Voice: new departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling? *FORUM* 43(2), 100-110. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2001.43.2.1

Fielding, M. (2012a) Beyond Student Voice: patterns of partnership and the demands of deep democracy, *Revista de Educación*, 359, 45-65.
http://redined.mecd.gob.es/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11162/95225/00820123017300.pdf?sequence=1

Fielding, M. (2012b) Beyond Student Voice: patterns of partnership and the demands of deep democracy, *Connect*, 197, 10-15.
http://research.acer.edu.au/connect/vol2012/iss197/

Fielding, M. & McGregor, J. (2005) Deconstructing Student Voice: new spaces for dialogue or new opportunities for surveillance? Paper presented at Speaking up and Speaking out: international perspectives on the democratic possibilities of student voice. Symposium, AERA Montreal.
http://networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk/knowledge-base/conference-papers/aera-05-paper-deconstructing-student-voice-mf-jm.pdf

Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) (2008) Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. Melbourne: MCEETYA/Curriculum Corporation.
www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf

Nathan & Rory (2013). Our First Teach the Teacher Session, *Connect*, 203, 17.
http://research.acer.edu.au/connect/vol2013/iss203/

Ponari, E. & Amat, D. (2012) How to Run a 'Teach the Teacher' Course. Melbourne: VicSRC. http://www.vicsrc.org.au/resources/representplus

Pretlove, Z. (2013) Teach the Teacher Continues, *Connect*, 201, 14-15.
http://research.acer.edu.au/connect/vol2013/iss201/

Seddon, K. (2013) Ten Schools Developing Teach the Teacher, *Connect*, 203, 17.
http://research.acer.edu.au/connect/vol2013/iss203/

West, L. (2004) The Learner's Voice: making space? Challenging Space? Keynote address, Canterbury Action Research Network (CANTARNET) Conference, reported in *The Enquirer*, Spring 2005.
http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/education/education-leadership-school-improvement/cantarnet/docs/spring-05.pdf

---

ROGER HOLDSWORTH has been editor and publisher of *Connect*, a bi-monthly Australian journal supporting student participation, since 1979. It is now freely available online (http://www.asprinworld.com/connect). Roger is also a volunteer supporter of the VicSRC, the peak body for student councils in secondary schools in Victoria, and an honorary research associate at the Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne. In other lives, he presents the *Global Village*, a weekly program of 'world music' (www.pbsfm.org.au/globalvillage) on Melbourne community station PBS 106.7 FM. *Correspondence*: r.holdsworth@unimelb.edu.au