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Enacting Student Voice through Governance Partnerships in the Classroom: rupture of the ordinary for radical practice

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ABSTRACT Student voice is a construct that has come to mean many things to many people. In this article the author is interested in forms of student voice practice that generate a shift in status for students, from passive recipients of schooling to governance partners with teachers in the classroom. She argues that governance partnerships that include students in joint pedagogical decision-making in the classroom embody the radical intent of student voice, which is to disrupt educational hierarchies and generate roles of influence for students. Within an educational context where student voice can mean almost anything – so is in danger of meaning very little – governance partnerships disrupt the ordinary as a starting point for radical practice.

Student Voice

Student voice is concerned centrally with making space for students and their perspectives to contribute to debate and decision-making about learning, schooling and educational policy. Thomson (2011) argues that 'voice is inherently concerned with questions of power and knowledge, with how decisions are made, who is included and excluded and who is advantaged and disadvantaged as a result' (p. 21). Traditionally, students have been excluded from decisions about learning and teaching; these decisions have been made by educators and policy makers. Where students have been involved in decision-making, it is often only once significant decisions have been made (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999). To disrupt one-way adult pedagogical decision-making, researchers and educators increasingly look for ways to include students in debate and decisions about their learning and education (Cook-Sather, 2007).

Increasingly students are consulted about their perspectives on their learning and schooling (Bragg, 2007). While students' perspectives are sought, often through surveys and interviews, their status is not necessarily improved (Johnston & Nicholls, 1995). For this reason Mager and Nowak (2012) distinguish between one-off consultation and student voice approaches where students have 'some influence over the decisions being made and actions taken' (p. 40) as a result of their initial consultation. More agentically, students are invited to participate as researchers to investigate educational issues and questions pertinent to them. While these initiatives involve students actively in decisions that emerge from their involvement, they are often linked to school improvement purposes rather than student empowerment ideals (Taylor & Robinson, 2009; Bragg & Manchester, 2012).

Despite increased inclusion of students as 'expert witnesses' of schooling by teachers and policy makers (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004), establishing ongoing influential roles for students has proved difficult to achieve. As Thomson (2011) argues, 'children and young people are rarely involved in substantive and on-going classroom conversations about pedagogy and knowledge' (p. 25). Student involvement in governance partnerships with teachers has the potential to shatter the 'glass ceiling' of typical student involvement in student voice initiatives, 'rupturing the ordinary' (Fielding, 2004) and 're-making the territory' of what it means to be a teacher and a student (Edwards & Fowler, 2007). Such student voice initiatives do not take an uncritical 'chicken soup' approach to students' perspectives as unquestionably good (Lundy, 2007). They promote ongoing dialogic interaction between students and teachers as they debate and decide learning and pedagogy together. At the same time, power relations and how these 'shape and channel' classroom action and relationships are problematised through practices of critical reflexivity (Bragg, 2007). Governance partnerships embody the radical intent of student voice to disrupt educational hierarchies that exclude students from roles of influence (Bragg, 2007) within an educational context where student voice can mean almost anything so is in danger of meaning very little.

Student Voice in the New Zealand Context

In the New Zealand educational context the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), encourages teachers to 'look for ways to involve students directly in decisions relating to their own learning' (p. 34). Schools are required to devise their own local school curriculum, under the umbrella of the national curriculum, which addresses the needs and aspirations of their local school communities. In this ongoing development and review process some schools choose to include their students as a consultation group.

Student voice is enacted largely through pedagogical traditions prevalent in New Zealand schools. These traditions include assessment for learning, inquiry learning, student leadership, e-learning, personalised learning and teaching for diversity (Hipkins, 2010). However, even within these pedagogical

spaces potentially fertile for the development of governance partnerships, student voice is limited largely to student decision-making around their own learning rather than broader concerns of devising pedagogy and curriculum and negotiating what counts as important knowledge.

The Study

Three 'student-voice-friendly' teachers and their composite Years 7 and 8 classes (students aged 11-13 years), within one New Zealand intermediate school participated in this three-cycle action research project across the 2010 school year. The teachers – Chicken, Betty and Lincoln (pseudonyms) – were all interested to learn more about effective teaching from their students and to involve their students in the design of classroom pedagogy. Each of the three had either participated in student voice projects before, were committed to pedagogical traditions associated with student voice in New Zealand, or saw student voice as a 'should' circulating within their broader professional development domains. As a broad focus of the research the three teachers and their students explored what it would take to enact student/teacher governance partnerships in their classrooms within one aspect of their class programme.

In Action Cycle One a student research group (SRG) of twelve students, four from each of the three participating classes, completed a photo assignment (Taylor, 2002; Kroeger et al, 2004) to represent their perceptions of effective teaching and their perceptions of conditions for their engagement in learning at school. SRG members shared their images in individual photo elicitation interviews (Clark-Ibanez, 2004) with myself as the researcher. The three teachers analysed transcripts of these student photo elicitation interviews together. The analysis they generated became a starting point for wider exploration of these themes with all their students in Action Cycle Two, and an ongoing reference point for their reflection on their teaching practice across the research. In Action Cycle Three each of the three classes co-constructed an action research project in one area of the class programme that aligned classroom pedagogy with the students' notions of good teaching and engagement. All students within the three classes took part in the class action projects as part of their class learning. However, all students were also afforded the option to opt out of the research components of the broader action research project. This meant that students who declined to participate (2-3 in each class) were not captured in photographs and other data. Their perspectives shared as part of their learning and samples of their class work were not included or reported as data within the broader action research project.

The SRG and the three teachers met separately with me to reflect on aspects of their classroom action research projects regularly across the research. The SRG members and the teachers chose pseudonyms to use across the research to protect their anonymity. These pseudonyms are used in this article to identify the students and teachers with their perspectives.

I present examples of classroom action as well as SRGs', teachers' and my own reflections on aspects of the class action research project to demonstrate how enacting a governance partnership within this project was at once radical and problematic. In the interests of space I illustrate the points I make in this article with examples drawn from Chicken's research with her students in Action Cycle Three.

Background: the home-learning project

Chicken's class decided to redesign home learning in their classroom. Home learning was the term used within the school to describe the homework programme. Their collective goal was to develop home learning that was meaningful and relevant to the students. The home-learning focus emerged from mutual student and teacher dissatisfaction with the school-wide compulsory home-learning programme. This programme required students to complete a home-learning grid of 12 pre-set activities across a three-week time frame.

> We discovered that not all of us enjoy the grid style of home learning so we decided to look at designing and implementing alternatives. (Class Learning Journal entry)

For Chicken's students, the grid did not provide enough opportunities for creativity and imagination, and for some the three-week time frame was too long for them to maintain their focus and complete required tasks.

> It didn't really work for me, like I'd rather do some creativity stuff. (Honey Bunny)
> [I prefer] activities that can lead to being creative, thinking outside the square, not things you would do every day. (Pockit Rockit)

From Chicken's perspective, she had noticed that the quality of her students' contributions to their home learning had declined across the year. She felt that the school-wide grid was not responsive to the espoused learning preferences of her students (for integration, co-construction, creativity and imagination) or to her class context.

Opening up the home-learning agenda to student input and decision-making represented a bold step. Prior to this project, any student complaints around the home-learning programme had been shut down:

> We got told to 'suck it up' because that was what home learning was. (Pockit Rockit)

Over a ten-week time frame the home-learning project became the class inquiry. The project unfolded through teacher and student co-construction of four central classroom 'events': (1) posing and surfacing initial perspectives on the research question 'What is effective home learning?'; (2) collaborative analysis of student perceptions; (3) ranking the student-constructed dimensions of

effective home learning; and (4) the students implementing the home-learning framework they designed. This article considers the first two of these four events.

Governance Partnerships: early tensions

Tensions emerged almost immediately within the home learning project between the students' views of the purpose of home learning and Chicken's expectations around deep learning.

> It's amazing for a lot of kids the purpose of effective homework [is that it] looks like they've spent a lot of time on it. You know, the prettiness of things. (Chicken)

Although she wanted to promote student ownership of their learning, Chicken also felt a responsibility as the teacher to promote quality student learning, which she characterised as demonstrating depth of thinking.

To negotiate this tension, Chicken asked the students to focus more deeply on the question 'What is effective home learning?' First, the students wrote individual reflections on this question in their learning journals. Then the students came together and shared their perspectives with each other in a class brainstorm facilitated by Chicken. In this process the students got to hear and engage with each other's ideas in a way that they would not have if their initial ideas were accepted uncritically by Chicken.

Disrupting Default Teacher Decision-making Processes

Chicken's initial plan after the students shared and recorded their individual views on home learning was to collect the learning journals and analyse each student's perspective. She intended to map their preferences and identify how she would differentiate her home-learning expectations accordingly. In short, she planned to decide on behalf of the students.

In a planning and reflection session Chicken and I identified an opportunity to 'rupture the ordinary'. We would involve her students as researchers analysing their own perceptions of effective home learning and those of their peers. We devised a collaborative analysis process, with the students' answers to 'What is effective home learning?' as data and the students participating as researchers. The students worked together in their class seating groups (4-6 students) and coded their individual responses to the question 'What is effective home learning?' They wrote their codes on individual sticky Post-it notes. Once they had finished individually coding the data, the groups of students combined their Post-it note codes onto a chart (Figure 1) and identified overarching themes for each cluster.

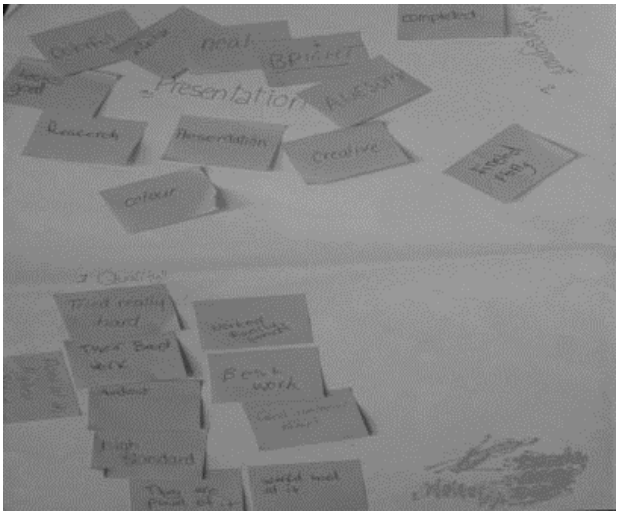

Figure 1. Grouping codes and devising themes.

New Roles – Teacher as Capacity Builder

Chicken roamed among the seating groups as the students worked together to identify themes and commonalities within their combined data. She used her discourse and interaction with the students to scaffold the qualitative data analysis process and build the students' capacity as researchers. To achieve this, she created and shared norms about the research analysis process.

> Remembering guys that with this activity everyone's idea is acknowledged. So if you think effective learning looks like this or like that, you just stick it down and put it in there. Cos it's what you think. So everyone's ideas are acknowledged and accepted. That's part of doing this table group activity. (Chicken)

She also used different forms of questioning to encourage, challenge and refine the students' thinking about their coding.

> *Chicken*: Okay guys. So tell me what you've got here. You've got three quite distinct groups, what are the commonalities in this group here? What are the themes here?
> *Student 1*: That one's like our work like 'high standards' so it's 'neat'.
> *Chicken*: Okay so what would be a theme that you could have that encompasses all of those ideas there? Do you think they're all very alike?
> *Student 1*: Yeah.
> *Student 2*: Yeah.
> *Chicken*: Or could you split it a bit more?

Student 1: No, they're all really alike.
Chicken: Okay. So what's a theme? If you were to give it a name what would you say?
Student 3: Best effort? Or?
Student 2: Or like 'quality'.
Chicken: Quality? That's a great word. So you could call that quality. So you might just write that there 'quality'. Okay. [Chicken moves off to another group]
Student 4: That could be time. [Taps a group of Post-it notes]
Students 1 & 2: Time management.
Student 4: And that could be presentation.

Once the seating groups had identified commonalities in their data and labelled these as themes, the students were encouraged to visit other seating groups to look at the themes that their classmates had come up with on their charts. They were also asked to rank their groups' themes in order of importance to them. Grouping the sticky Post-it notes with their theme also helped the students identify the indicators that elaborated each theme.

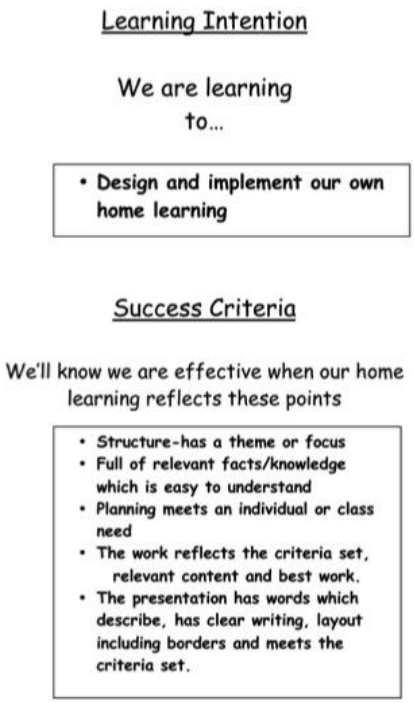

Figure 2. Finalised home-learning project learning intention and success criteria.

The collaborative analysis process maximised student interaction and collaboration. The sticky Post-it notes afforded the students opportunities to negotiate and contest ideas easily. This process also opened up student talk that Chicken would not have been able to access if she had adopted a more teacher-directed pedagogical approach. The session design also allowed Chicken to focus her participation on scaffolding her students' capacity to participate together as researchers.

Space does not permit a thorough description of the entire home-learning class action research project. However, I include the final framework of effective home learning (Figure 2), written as success criteria, that the students and Chicken co-constructed across the four main events of the project. This framework was ultimately utilised by pairs of students to design and implement their own home-learning programme.

Chicken could have devised this chart quite quickly and easily without the input of her students. But by making the time available for intensive student collaboration, devising the collaborative analysis process and encouraging depth of thinking, Chicken scaffolded the students to participate with her and with each other as governance partners. Together they decided what counted as important knowledge around home learning in their class, and in the process came to know each other better as learners.

Governance Partnerships: reflections from different vantage points

From Chicken's vantage point the collaborative analysis process successfully positioned students to participate as researchers with each other. She identified students talking, negotiating and justifying their ideas with each other as evidence of her students' engagement in the analysis process. She associated these activities with students taking greater ownership of their learning.

> I loved that table group. I do, that was so cool. They loved the stickies ... they love sticking them and then taking them and moving them. You can hear all the language, you can hear things like, 'no I think that one goes best here'. Like I just wandered around, because the kids were all engaged like, moving the stickies around into new areas. I think they liked that. They liked doing that kind of thing ... They're listening, they're talking, they're working collaboratively. Some kids that struggle in other areas are really working together in a group, in a pair, more so than I see them in other work. It's giving a chance for kids to have their voice, it's not always directed by me. (Chicken)

From my vantage point as the overall project researcher, I perceived the collaborative analysis process as radical because it had disrupted a default teacher practice – teachers making sense of students' perceptions for them without involving them. Instead of analysing the students' individual

perceptions of effective home learning, Chicken had involved the students to make collaborative sense of each other's perspectives and to negotiate the key themes within these with each other directly. To me this meant that the students had been included in generating what counted as important knowledge in their home-learning programme, decision-making previously being the domain of the teachers in the school.

However, while the collaborative analysis proved an opportunity to involve students as researchers and co-researchers, from my vantage point it could still be seen as an opportunity missed. Chicken and I could have decided to ask the students how they might have wanted to make sense of their initial perceptions of home learning, but we took the decision about the nature of the task ourselves. This action embodies a dilemma for me as a researcher because part of involving students in new governance roles with their teachers involves supporting teachers' learning also as they enact these new roles. Throughout the study I took the approach that Chicken needed the support structures in place to reflect on her practice and to tease out possibilities in a way that preserved her professional dignity. For Chicken, her preference was to meet with me regularly to talk through and plan her responses to her students. But unwittingly this support structure perpetuated default practices of educators deciding 'behind the scenes'.

From their individual vantage points, the four SRG members from Chicken's class viewed the collaborative analysis process very differently to Chicken, to myself as the overall project researcher, and also to each other. Two of the students viewed the collaborative analysis process as an opportunity to 'get a say' on the current home-learning programme.

> You get a say in what you're doing and it's cool because there's lots of things that you don't like in here [in the home learning book] and you do something different and you feel happier, and with a happy attitude it's fun to do the other things. (Shortstuff)

> I liked it 'cos we got our say and like the teacher listened to what we wanted. (Honey Bunny)

More ambivalently, two of the SRG students questioned the rigour and challenge of the home-learning activities designed by students. Pockit Rockit felt Chicken should retain overall control of the home-learning programme but give students limited choice over some activities.

> I prefer that she just kept it the way it was but every week we just had a discussion about one square that changed in our home learning grid. 'Cos then it would be kinda easy. Some of the kids in our class might just, say, not have the best ideas and make [activities] really easy ... and we wouldn't really get anything out of them. (Pockit Rockit)

The collaborative analysis process challenged the views Honey Bunny and Pockit Rockit held on group work. Both students perceived that when more than one student came up with the same coding category this meant they had copied ideas from each other. They had expected more diversity in the ideas of their class mates. Flippinschnip did not enjoy the collaborative analysis process because 'it took a long time' and his contribution, in the form of a smiley face, was removed from the group chart by another student.

The collaborative analysis process seemed also to disrupt the students' tacit assumptions about the role of the teacher and that of the learner in the educative process – the existing educational hierarchy.

> I just don't see the point, why should the students create the home learning when teachers can make a perfectly good job of it? (Flippinschnip)

> When the teachers do it, it seems a bit more organized than when we do it. (Honey Bunny)

One SRG student counter-proposed the continuation of the status quo student/teacher educational hierarchy.

> They're the teachers ... because they went to university and they got their degree so they are teachers, that's their job, they come here to teach us and we come here to learn ... We shouldn't be the ones that say what we should do all the time. (Honey Bunny)

The Radical Element in the Student Positioning as Governance Partners

Chicken reflected on the radical governance element around student positioning in the home-learning project. She reflected on the student/teacher positioning using the Ladder of Pupil Participation (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004), an important heuristic for her in her student-voice work:

> I was looking at my ladder of pupil participation and I was thinking that you would definitely, the kids are definitely right up the ladder. They are pupils as researchers 'cos I thought, they were involved in the inquiry and they've got an active role in the decision making. They're not just in the inquiry, they're actually involved in the decision making. ... It's more than creating activities ... they're owning all the criteria, they've made it. (Chicken)

There was student-voice potential within Chicken's conventional class inquiries, but the positioning of students within the home-learning project broke the glass ceiling for student participation. Supporting the students to participate as researchers of their own perspectives disrupted the ordinary. The students decided what counted as important knowledge in identifying the criteria that came to define effective home learning in their classroom.

Governance Partnerships, Risk and Discomfort for Teachers

Enacting a governance partnership with her students raised another pertinent tension for Chicken. Accountability expectations around teachers' practice in New Zealand created tensions for Chicken in her practice. Although the New Zealand Curriculum promotes pedagogy that involves students actively in decision-making about their learning, teachers receive contradictory messages around student achievement. This tension influenced where Chicken was prepared to locate her classroom research project. Chicken avoided literacy (a national priority area) as a curriculum site for the class action research project, opting instead for the more low-stakes area of home learning.

> We have got targets, we have got kids that we have to target in literacy and they have to meet those targets if not more ... You panic, if I give the kids too much freedom are they going to meet the criteria? And then it comes back to us, why aren't, in interviews, then parents are saying, why aren't they? What is happening? (Chicken)

This tension for teachers was discussed during a collective action research meeting discussion between the researcher, Chicken and the other two participating teachers, Betty and Lincoln.

> *Betty*: Like we are told to do all this co-constructing thing, but then we are told, we need these results and these targets met, and they don't really match.
> *Chicken*: It's really hard to get them to connect.
> *Betty*: You don't know what's more important.
> *Chicken*: And you sort of end up 'wooooo' [overwhelmed].
> *Betty*: So you are told to do everything but they are two different ends of the spectrum.

Locating the student-voice class project within the low-stakes home-learning area represented a way for Chicken to negotiate the tensions within the New Zealand educational context. It also illustrates how teachers perceive student empowerment initiatives are constrained within the broader audit culture (Biesta, 2004) of contemporary education, characterised by external accountability, student achievement targets and heavily prescribed pedagogy.

Even though home learning represented a low-stakes area for the class action research project compared with high-stakes areas such as literacy and numeracy, it is important to note that opening up this area to student negotiation represented a risk for Chicken. She strayed from compliance with the school-wide home-learning programme, and despite the success of the home-learning project, Chicken was asked to implement the schools' standardised home-learning programme the following year.

Concluding Remarks

In practice, enacting student/teacher governance partners can at once represent a radical act and prove problematic in its effects. However, Butler (2000) argues there is always a 'certain distance ... between the ideality of the ideal and the givenness of any of its modes of instantiation' (p. 269). Examples of this tension have been illustrated within the initial action research activities of Chicken's home-learning programme with her students. At times the norms of the home-learning project led to clashes between student, teacher and researcher norms and raised new tensions to negotiate. As a researcher committed to student voice that promotes governance status for students, I view these tensions as productive starting points for further research and reflection. I am inspired to take this position by Cook-Sather, who notes, 'when one tries to alter established educational structures and power dynamics one necessarily faces a variety of difficulties, which are also opportunities' (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 14).

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