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Engaging with Student Voice in Research, Education and Community

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Part I
The Field Today

In this opening section, we map the contemporary 'field' of student voice and explore current social and policy contexts with regard to the use of student voice. In constructing this 'mapping', we are acutely aware of the long and rich history of student voice work, internationally: ideas about the importance of students engaging as active agents and participants in their learning go back to the multiple works of John Dewey in the early Twentieth century, whose ideas are very closely connected to the basis of contemporary approaches to student voice. Our concern in this section is to contextualise our discussion of student voice work theoretically, politically and in terms of key contemporary conceptualisations of 'student voice'.

We explore the participation of children and young people in research, developing a theoretical case for the creation of authentic, dialogic conditions that transcend consulting children and young people for the purposes of human capital development. We argue for the primacy of the more profound and robust question of education for citizenship and democracy. We use critical social theory as reflected in the work of Habermas and draw upon issues of dialogue, power and participation to identify challenging practices in educational institutions, constituting young people as agents within their communities.

In Chap. 3, we build on this theoretical foundation to consider the contemporary social and policy context of student voice work. Against a backdrop of the current push for compliance entrenched in neoliberal approaches to education, we argue that student voice work, understood in the context of democratic education, can offer an avenue for resistance. It is a participative process providing schools and teachers with a framework for action and practice that might be employed to 'push back' against the narrow and impoverished view of education encapsulated in the compliance agenda.

Finally, we explore the rationale for democratic student agency as it exists in the field of student voice work, problematising in the process the widely-adopted and seldom questioned principle of 'student empowerment' as a tenet of student voice. Furthermore, drawing links between student voice work and participatory action research or practitioner inquiry, we explore and trouble the framework of evidence-based practice as it has been employed within education and the place of student voice work in this context. We work with alternative approaches to student voice, arguing that a more appropriate rationale for this work lies in the building of democratic practices and student agency within schools and other educational institutions.

Chapter 1
Introduction: Beyond Legitimation and Guardianship

'Student voice', its articulation and integration into decision-making processes in schools and other educational and youth-focused institutions has become increasingly popular in recent years. Under the guise of 'evidence based practice', processes of gathering and using data from school and university students and other young people have been integrated into quality assurance regimes across a wide variety of contexts including schools and universities.

In this book we seek to interrupt the student voice juggernaut, asking what we regard as important questions about the use of student voice. Far from arguing *against* the importance of seeking to listen to, understand and respond to the concerns, perceptions and perspectives of young people, we aim to render problematic both the discourse of 'empowerment' surrounding the notion of consulting young people as well as the instrumentalist drive to utilise the voices of students and other young people as part of the 'what works' (Atkinson 2000; Biesta 2007; Mockler 2011) agenda.

We are mindful that research, be it with children and young people, or with others participating in one social act or another is always political. Santos (2012, p. 114), in writing of participatory action research writes that it is essentially so:

> since it entails human beings coming together, aiming to help identify and bring about suitable and meaningful forms of organisation—the *polis* through which members of communities—the polity can achieve their common goals.

This holds particularly so when considering the positioning of children and young people in relation to power and authority. Even with goodwill and determination it is difficult to dispute the discussion by Arnot and Reay (2007) that young people's voices are created by the relations in which they find themselves rather than in circumstances that are needed for change and reform.

Nonetheless, the case for consulting children and young people has been recognised, even sanctified by the United Nations.

The Case for Consulting Young People

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 1989, sets out the civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights of people under the age of 18 in its 54 articles and two optional protocols. The four core principles underpinning the Convention are as follows:

- non-discrimination;
- devotion to the best interests of the child;
- the right to life, survival and development; and
- respect for the views of the child.

The Convention is comprehensive and entitles children to a broad range of rights including, *inter alia,* the right:

- to express views in all decisions that affect them and the opportunity to be heard in any court or administrative proceedings;
- to freedom of expression and the right to seek, receive and impart information of all kinds;
- to have their best interests treated as a primary consideration in all actions concerning them, including decision relation to their care and protection;
- to free education available on the basis of their capacity; and
- to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and an adequate standard of living.

In particular, Article 12 indicates that:

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations 1989)

In this way the Convention recognises that children have particular needs and vulnerabilities which require special protection beyond the rights to which adults are entitled. Further, it establishes four principles to guide the interpretation of the Convention and assist countries in implementing their obligations these being: (i) non-discrimination; (ii) that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all decisions concerning children; (iii) the right to survival; and iv) the development and respect for the views of the child. Thus these rights outline the minimum standards necessary to ensure the wellbeing of children—including the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to health care, the right to education, the right to family life, the right to protection from violence, and the right to participate in one's culture.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the most widely ratified human rights instrument in history (Payne 2009), with all but two of the 194 member countries of the United Nations (Somalia and the United States of America) having ratified the Convention to date (UNICEF 2012). However, while it may be said that significant advances have been made in providing organizational

means for children's views to be heard through such mechanisms as Children's Commissioners and Ombudsmen, further sustaining and developing opportunities for young people to be fully engaged in those social agencies that govern their lives remains a challenge. The actualizing of these mechanisms cannot be said to have permeated more generally into services such as schooling, health and justice in ways that enable children and young people to be genuinely participative in processes of decision-making about issues of importance to them.

As a driver the UNCRC clearly gives legitimacy to consulting children and young people in diverse contexts, however, it is also the case that there is not a strong tradition of children's rights contributing to meaningful decision making regarding issues of significance and importance to them (Wisby 2011).

In this book, we aim to explore the expressive, referential, interactional, and social implications of seeking and listening to the voices of young people, within educational and cultural settings, both through the enactment of participatory research and also through the privileging of student voice in the everyday practices of these institutions. Our stance is such that we recognise not only the desirability of doing so, but the necessity of engaging with young people in ongoing and authentic dialogue if we are to realise the democratic, pedagogical and social aims of education in the twenty first century.

We recognise that following this call does not constitute an easy path: in many ways this kind of engagement is countercultural in times when, as we shall discuss below, instrumentalist discourses are powerful and intransigent; furthermore, the multifaceted ethical considerations embedded in this work can also add to the complexity of its enactment within educational and other communities. Nonetheless, we believe that the enterprise is more than worth the opportunity cost required for a more authentic inclusion of the contribution of children and young people who are often left at the margins of social enterprise.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, we explore three concepts key to the notion of seeking and listening to student voice, namely the context of 'evidence based practice' as enacted within education and other social service fields over the past decades; the role of student voice in the development of 'person-centred learning communities'; and the different levels of student voice engagement in educational communities and the implications of these. Each of these key concepts will be further expanded in subsequent chapters within the book. We conclude this introductory chapter with an overview of the remainder of the book.

Subverting the Dominant Paradigm: Evidence Based Practice and 'What Works'

The notion of evidence based practice in education has grown steadily since the 1990s, when David Hargreaves invoked medical-style evidence-based practice as a 'way forward' for the teaching profession (1996) in a drive to uncover and implement

'what works' (Hargreaves 1997). Here, as elsewhere (Groundwater-Smith et al. 2013), we wish to render problematic the very notion of evidence-based practice in education, arguing, along with others (e.g. Biesta 2007; Elliott 2001), that the narrow notions of 'evidence' inevitably embedded and enacted within a highly positivistic frame serve schools, teachers and the education enterprise very poorly indeed, despite serving compliance agendas perfectly well.

Our understanding of the notion of evidence in educational settings is informed by the Stenhousian notion of 'research based teaching' (Stenhouse 1983), which, interestingly, considering the focus of this book, is dually focused on issues of pedagogy and research. As John Elliott writes:

> For Stenhouse, *research-based teaching* is an implication of a theory of education that places induction into knowledge structures at its centre, and then characterises them as *objects for speculative thought*. This theory of education implies a logical framework for a teaching and learning process. At the centre of this framework is a pedagogical aim…. (Elliott 2001, p. 81)

Within Stenhouse's notion of research based teaching, evidence (broadly defined), teacher professional judgement, and the inquiry process itself form the basis for both teacher and, in turn, student learning. For Stenhouse, inquiry and teaching and learning are inseparable in the context of classroom practice, and here we find two key questions and concepts to which we shall return over the course of this book.

First, our advocacy of and belief in the importance of systematically gathering, listening to and integrating student voice into decision making processes, from the voices of those beginning their schooling through to those of students engaged in tertiary learning, relies on a particularly broad understanding of what 'evidence' is and how we believe it should be used. We are not advocating here an instrumentalist or compliance-driven model of 'student feedback', but rather a rich and complex process whereby teachers, students and others engaged in the education process work together to ask about, explain and listen to each others' perspectives. Such evidence is to be treated in a way more 'forensic' than 'adversarial' reaching toward what Michael Fielding (2011) has termed 'intergenerational learning as lived democracy', enacted within a context of democratic fellowship.

Second, we believe that the issue of privileging student voice in the context of practitioner inquiry raises many questions and implications for educational practice. Ethical and democratic classroom practice, we believe, engages students consistently in discussion of the processes and practices of learning, supports their metacognitive capacities and their capacity to make good decisions about their learning, and builds trust and respect between students and teachers. We do not believe that the use of 'student voice' within school or university communities should be confined to the peripherals of schooling, such as canteen menus and school uniforms, but rather that working authentically with student voice necessitates and ongoing pedagogical dialogue played out in classrooms on a consistent basis. For these are the communicative contexts within which exchanges may be fractured and fragmented or developed as coherent dialogic conditions for powerful and meaningful learning.

Educational Institutions as 'Person-Centred Learning Communities'

Fielding (2008) uses philosopher John Macmurray's distinction between functional and personal relations to explore the differences between schools as 'high performance learning organisations' and 'person-centred learning communities'. Fielding's conclusion is that 'high performance learning organisations' tend to privilege functional relations, "those that are overwhelmingly instrumental in their intention and expression and are defined by their purposes" (p. 61), using personal relations, those that "we enter into … with others because it is through them that we can be and become ourselves" (*ibid.*) for the sake of these. On the other hand, 'person-centred learning communities' tend to utilise the functional for the sake of developing the personal. The difference is a subtle but important one, described by Fielding thus:

> In essence we are talking about one mode which says 'Have a nice day' as part of a human relations mantra, and another mode which is genuinely welcoming and engaging of us; one mode which uses extra time for tutorials to jack up test scores, and another that places personal encounter through dialogue at the very heart of its daily educational processes and intentions; one in which the new sanctioning of creativity and personalisation is primarily the servant of the same narrow standards agenda, and another in which creativity and the engagement with young people as persons is the harbinger of a much richer, more demanding fulfilment of education for and in a democratic society. They are worlds apart; their felt realties are utterly at odds with each other. And yet, it is not always clear which frame is dominant, whose purposes are being served, whether we are the victims of those whose interests are quite other than those we would applaud, or whether we are part of something which is likely to turn out to be fulfilling and worthy of our support. In sum, it is not clear whether personalisation is a seductive re-articulation of corporate insinuation or a genuinely different orientation to what we do and how we might do it. (2008, p. 63)

In short, this is the difference between two sets of schools or organisations that claim to put 'relationships' at the heart of their enterprise. On the one hand, we see those organisations that privilege the instrumental, perhaps having taken on what Peter Taubman has called the "melancholic embrace" of audit (2009, p. 150), associated with the production of what Power (2003) has drawn as "the auditee":

> The auditee is undoubtedly a complex being: simultaneously devious and depressed; she is skilled at games of compliance but exhausted and cynical about them too; she is nervous about the empty certificates of comfort that get produced but she also colludes in amplifying audit mandates in local settings; she fears the mediocrity of the auditors at the same time as she regrets their powerlessness to discipline the "really bad guys"; she loathes the time wasted in rituals of inspection but accepts that this is probably what "we deserve"; she sees the competent and excellent suffer as they attempt to deal with the demands of quality assurance at the same time as the incompetent and idle manage to escape its worst excesses; she hears the rhetoric of excellence in official documents but lives a reality of decline; she takes notes after meetings with colleagues "just in case" and has more filing cabinets now than she did a few years ago; she knows the past was far from being a golden age but despairs of the iron cage of auditing; she knows public accountability and stakeholder dialogue are good things but wonders why, after all her years of training, she is not trusted as an expert anymore. (2003, p. 199–200)

On the other hand, we see schools and organisations where the seductive powers of audit and instrumentalism have not been so strong, where trust typically permeates and audit cultures, inescapable as they may be in the contemporary age, are seen more as a necessary evil than as a raison d'etre.

The strength of audit cultures within higher education and other public institutions can often obscure the voices of children and young people, simultaneously emphasising the importance of 'feedback' while at the same time failing to foster the authentic and ongoing discussions about learning that are the hallmarks of real learning communities. One of our intentions in this book is to explore the impact of audit upon educational institutions and understand the ways in which cultures of audit undermine real community, particularly in relation to student voice.

The authentic and consistent integration of student voice is both a marker of and an obligation for schools that aim to function as person centred learning communities. We believe strongly that the 'community' dimension implies an ongoing dialogue on the part of all community members, an understanding that different individuals play different roles within the community, but also, a willingness to be open and respectful of the voices of those who might otherwise wield less power despite having at least as much invested in the educative process as others.

Beyond Legitimation and Guardianship: Not All 'Student Voice' is Equal

As alluded to in the sections above, a variety of different approaches to and 'uses' of student voice can be identified: some supporting the development of generative learning communities and others feeding more instrumentalist agendas. This can be said to hold for students at all levels of the educational provision, from early childhood to tertiary engagement. For example, the rise of audit cultures in universities, closely linked to the commodification of higher education and the positioning of students as 'consumers' of a product, has led to a widespread adoption of 'student voice' as a marketing tool. In situations such as this, it could be argued that feedback from students is wielded as something of a blunt instrument and used in a purely transactional manner, generally not reaching what we would consider to constitute authentic engagement. In a similar manner in the UK the requirement of the British Education Act 2002 has placed a duty on schools and local authorities to consult young people about decisions affecting them, thus the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) requires the systematic collection of the views of children and young people, but whether these are ultimately employed as celebratory accounts or authentic critiques of practice may be seen as a moot point. In a contrary way it has also been possible to use (or mis-use) the voices of young people to impose impossible conditions on educational institutions. Stronach's poignant account of the demise of Summer hill points to little attention being paid to the views of those who would be most affected by the changing of the school's ethos (2002).

Michael Fielding (2011) has elaborated a hierarchy of interaction between adults and young people in educational contexts. The typology, entitled *Patterns of partnership: How adults listen to and learn with students in schools*, comprises the following:

1. Students as data source—in which staff utilise information about student progress and well-being
2. Students as active respondents—in which staff invite student dialogue and discussion to deepen learning/professional decisions
3. Students as co-enquirers—in which staff take a lead role with high-profile, active student support
4. Students as knowledge creators—in which students take lead roles with active staff support
5. Students as joint authors—in which students and staff decide on a joint course of action together
6. Intergenerational learning as participatory democracy—in which there is a shared commitment to/responsibility for the common good (Fielding 2011, p. 67)

While Fielding conceptualises the forms of interaction as manifesting differing power relations, he is clear that all types of engagement, from teachers utilising test scores to make judgements about the best course of action for individual students (i.e. 'students as data source') to situations in which students and teachers work together to plan learning experiences (i.e. 'intergenerational learning as participatory democracy') constitute authentic engagement. Over the years, we have been involved with many school and institutional contexts where staff and students have engaged at all six levels, often in a sequential or semi-sequential process, where, for example, teachers find that 'mining' student results to inform teacher decision-making opens the door to seeking out more active dialogue with students regarding their learning, which in turn opens the door to working alongside students in the course of inquiry, and so on. The case studies presented in Part II of this book explore a range of ways in which adults working in schools, cultural institutions and universities can and do engage young people and the conditions and dispositions that foster authentic engagement.

The Structure of this Book

This book is presented in three parts, focusing variously upon the mapping of the field and current policy and social contexts; case study examples from a variety of different contexts; and finally, philosophical and practical perspectives on how to engage with student voice in research, classroom and other institutional contexts, such that ongoing and authentic dialogue with students becomes not only part of 'what we do' in educational communities but indeed shapes 'who we are'.

Chapter 2 develops the theoretical case for the creation of authentic, dialogic conditions that transcend consulting children and young people for the purposes of

human capital development, and recaptures the more profound question of education for citizenship. Here, we use as reference points critical social theory as reflected in the work of, among others, Habermas, and Bourdieu.

Chapter 3 takes up the key issues raised in this introductory chapter and the theoretical foundations chapter, and explores the tension between the current push for compliance and approaches to education and inclusion that seek to legitimately enfranchise young people. We explore more fully the impact of compliance and audit on educational and other public institutions and highlight the ways in which these can be counterproductive to the kinds of democratic practices we are arguing for.

In *Chap. 4*, we explore the rationale for democratic student agency and problematise the widely-adopted notion of 'student empowerment' and the framework of evidence-based practice as it has been employed within education. In this chapter we work with the 'ladder of participation' to consider what it means for the involvement of children and young people in research and inquiry as well as the implications for classroom practice and pedagogy of young people's active engagement in dialogue and decision making about their education.

Chapter 5 marks the beginning of Part 2, in which we outline three cases located in Australia, but clearly having a wider application, as narratives of practice, designed to elicit principles of practice which will be further explored in Part 3. The case embedded in Chap. 5 elaborates the experience of a comprehensive government co-educational high school that has, for four years invited mainly Year nine students to investigate the school they would like, the learning they would like, the student that they would like to be and what they would like to learn.

The case embedded in *Chap. 6* relates to cooperating with learner services offered by cultural institutions outside the classroom. The case study will draw on our experiences working with organisations such as The Australian Museum, the NSW State Library and Taronga Zoo Education to examine the ways in which student voice contributes to 'audience research' in these contexts and the part young people can and do play in shaping the pedagogical intent and practice of organisations such as these.

In *Chap. 7*, we explore the development of sustainable and collaborative partnerships (including those with health, recreation and environmental agencies). By moving beyond school education to consider the ways in which the voices of children and young people can make a meaningful contribution to services designed for them in such varied contexts as juvenile justice and town planning we explore ways in which new models of participation might be built.

In *Chap. 8*, the context of higher education is explored. Here we examine and critique the trend to collect student feedback through student satisfaction with teaching and learning and resource management as a measure of 'service quality' typically using 'one-off' inventories. We explore the implications of these approaches using our participatory lens.

Part 3, encompassing Chaps. 9 to 12, explores philosophical and practical perspectives on engaging with student voice across different educational and community contexts. In *Chap. 9*, we explore an assembly of methods for engaging students in participatory inquiry, including surveys, observations, interviews (individual and

group), using visual processes and social media. Here we aim to provide a rationale for the use of different methods in participatory research with young people, and argue for the use of different strategies and approaches at different stages.

Chapter 10 explores the emerging ethical issues in researching with children and young people as the practice has burgeoned and evolved. While originally the concern was to minimise harm, we argue that a more nuanced understanding of power relations is required, such that the goals of ethical praxis and those embedded in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child, are honoured.

Chapter 11 focuses on the links between pedagogical reform and student voice, and the implications of the authentic embedding of student voice in educational cultures for pedagogical practice. Here we highlight the links between inquiry and pedagogy, and explore the kinds of pedagogical practices that align with the democratic values embedded in authentic learning communities and those that might hinder or undermine participatory and democratic practice.

Finally, in *Chap. 12* we develop a 'charter for reform'. We argue for a critical alignment of epistemology, principles and practices, and suggest ways in which practitioners and leaders in schools, universities and other institutions might work to bring about this alignment to the benefit of their students and communities more broadly.

Contemporary expressions of 'student voice work' are often limited to the use of students as data source: most generally, it is used to legitimate decisions taken by adults within the community and to position the most powerful members of the community as guardians of the status quo while at the same time paying lip service to democratic practices. Our argument in this book is that if schools and other institutions are to function as places where human beings and human community flourish, a different vision must be employed. In short, we must push student voice work 'beyond legitimation and guardianship' (Fielding and Moss 2011). While we do not claim to have all the answers as to what this vision might look like and how it might function in the myriad of educational and other communities that might wish to take it up, we do wish that our writing and the many examples that we have selected can act as provocations for those who would desire to do things differently. Indeed, we would argue, such an approach runs counter to our ongoing critique of 'what works', and rather moves towards multiple and various possibilities that can lead to authentic transformations in practice.