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Student Voice in Curriculum Change: A Theoretical Reasoning

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Abstract
Views about the place of young people in schools and society have changed over the past few years. A major theme in the theoretical framework of constructivist learning is that learning is an active process in which learners connect new knowledge and skills to existing ones and, thus, construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current and past knowledge. In this review, we argue that students' involvement provides opportunities for them to become active participants in their education, including making decisions about what and how they learn and how their learning is assessed. Student voice is located within a complex web of school structures and cultures that are shaped by policymakers, school leaders, teachers, researchers and students themselves. Listening and learning from student voices necessitate a shift from the ways in which teachers are engaged with students and how they perceive their own practices. Using Constructivism reasoning, we theorize that through learning, students acquire specific knowledge, which empowers them to have capacity to participate in curriculum decisions. In relation to this framework, we argue that by the time the learner has acquired knowledge and skills from learning, he should be able to share that accumulation of knowledge and skills to the curriculum development process. Further, we look at curriculum change and suggest that it refers to educational change that conveys the image of starting anew, of changing not only content but also form, of shifting from thinking with the old order to inventing a new order that is found on new assumptions, values and vision. Students' input is important in its own right, but allowing them to participate in curriculum change empowers them and encourages them to take responsibility for matters that concern them. We conceptualize that the presence of student's voice should be felt in all manner of school development.

Keywords: Student, voice, curriculum change, theoretical underpinning, participatory design, constructivism.

Introduction

In its modern interpretation, student voice is focused predominantly on the design, facilitation and improvement of learning (Mitra 2004). Views about the place of young people in schools and society have changed over the past generation. Traditionally, the views and opinions of children were often discounted as having less legitimacy than the views of adults but as attitudes towards children and young people changed, different views have arisen associated with these changes. Over the past two decades schools and education systems have used a range of terms that capture the changing views and developments. For example, in the 1980s, the terminology of the day reflected current values and beliefs about the place of students within schools. Terms such as 'student empowerment', 'student rights' and 'student participation' acknowledged the rights of children and aimed to empower them through various school programs and activities that were regarded as appropriate.

Hand in hand with the implementation of personalized learning are strong links with constructivist learning theory (Bruner 1966) and recent brain research, both of which emphasizing the importance to learning of student autonomy, including students actively determining what they learn and having a role in the direction of their learning.

A major theme in the theoretical framework of constructivist learning is that learning is an active process in which learners connect new knowledge and skills to existing ones and, thus, construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current and past knowledge. This, according to Bruner (1996) should be achieved through the engagement of learners and teachers in an active conversation that involves finding out what students already know, linking new knowledge to existing knowledge and experience, allowing student responses to drive lessons and change strategies, and encouraging and accepting student initiatives.

Similarly, evidence from contemporary cognitive psychology highlights the importance of effective cognitive and metacognitive skills in learning. It indicates that learning is not in fact acquired via a building-blocks approach, but it proceeds in many directions at once and at an uneven pace. Dietel at al (1991) contend that to become competent thinkers and problem solvers learners must:

- think and actively construct evolving mental models
- be able to interpret the information they receive and relate it to knowledge they already have
- be active participants in their own learning if they are to become competent thinkers and problem solvers.

'Voice' in this context is 'not simply about the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it is about having the power to influence change' (West 2004). Meaningful involvement of students means 'validating and authorizing them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge and experiences throughout education in order to improve our schools (Fletcher 2005). It provides opportunities for them to become active participants in their education, including making decisions about what and how they learn and how their learning is assessed.

Ranson (2000) argues for 'pedagogy of voice', which enables learners to explore self and identity, develop self-understanding and self-respect and improve agency, capability and potential.

Jackson (2005) maintains that student voice is about valuing people and valuing the learning that results when we engage the capacities and multiple voices in our schools. It focuses on realizing the leadership potential inherent within all learners. In practice there are five dimensions to pupil involvement:

1. Student involvement in school and community development
2. Students as researchers and co-enquirers
3. Student feedback on teaching and learning
4. Students as peer-tutors
5. Student involvement as a manifestation of inclusion principles.

Student Voice and Participatory Design

There have been historical examples of student involvement in educational decision making, but it is only in two decades that the concept of actively including students in school planning has gained ground (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Although there are multiple definitions of student voice, in this paper it will be considered to be the systematic inclusion and empowerment of students in the decision making processes of schools (Mitra and Gross, 2009). It is important to note that this paper will not focus on student voice in all the facets of school decision making, but rather will focus specifically on the role students can play in regards to the content and structure of the curriculum in their classrooms and schools. One common method of achieving student voice in this specific area is through participatory design projects. For the purposes of this paper participatory design will include any initiative that has as its basis the involvement of the end user in the design process (Konings, Brand-Gruwel, Saskia and van Merriernboer, 2010). It should be noted that throughout this paper the term student voice and student participation will be used interchangeably. In both cases, the term will refer, specifically, to the concept of student involvement in curriculum planning and implementation at the class, school, or a wider level.

The Role of Student Voice in Research and Educational Change

Student voice has emerged as the single term in educational research to encompass a spectrum of initiatives that advocate the redefinition of the role of students in research and educational change. Cook-Sather (2006) describes student voice as having a legitimate perspective, presence and active role. Wolk (1998) argues that everyone has a voice and, therefore, this is not something that can be "given", and he asks, "What do we do with it? And to what conscious degree have we developed it and continue to develop it?" (p. 186). Student voice is located within a complex web of school structures and cultures that are shaped by policymakers, school leaders, teachers, researchers and students themselves. In its most conservative form, voice means having a say when asked but without any guarantee of a necessary response, whereas in its most radical form it calls for "a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p 363).

Interest in student voice has re-emerged because of a call among progressive educators to review the structures, practices and values that dominate schooling and which contrast sharply with how young people live today, as (is) discussed below (Rudduck, 2007). Children's right to express their views was also legitimated internationally by the 1989 United Nations (UN)

Convention on the Rights of the Child; in Britain implementation was slow and, for example, impacted on legislation such as *"Every Child Matter"* (Her Majest's Treasury, 2003) more than the conduct of schools (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Principles of student voice have been effectively enacted within schools in different ways internationally as, for example, in:

- *Denmark*: The government has emphasized student voice as a vehicle for creating democratic schools (Flutter, 2007);
- *US:* Student voice has been about promoting diversity and breaking down racial and class barriers (Mitra, 2001);
- *New Zealand:* Voice has been one of several strategies used to foster active and widespread student participation within schools and the local community (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2003);
- *Chile*: Secondary students and university researchers co-investigated and designed innovative pedagogies and curriculum materials to develop education in democracy (Fielding and Prieto, 2002).

In thinking about the contributions of student voice, its advocates (Mitra, 2001; Fielding, 2001, 2004, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006; MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck and Myers, 2003; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007) have argued for its contribution to new ways of thinking about improving schools in two main ways. Firstly, it offers teachers important insights into learning, teaching and schooling from the perspective of different students and groups of students as "expert witnesses" (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p 4). Consequently, this work potentially challenges the passive role of students within schools and may redefine student-teacher relationships as a joint endeavor in learning (Fielding, 2007). Secondly, student voice advocates claim that this work enables students to actively shape their education as citizens. Holdsworth (2000), for example, argues that UK and Australian (and, we would add, Kenya and Tanzania) schools tend to apply minimalist notions of citizenship education which emphasize institutionalized rules about rights and responsibilities for future would-be citizens such as young people, rather than maximalist interpretations that include active, democratic participation as shapers of, and decision-makers within, communities in the present. This view also aims to counter conventional conceptions of young people as vulnerable, incompetent and immature (Grace, 1995). It also questions the deep school structures that reduce student' status to one of compliant dependence without recognizing the extent to which students today already make many important decisions in their lives as a result of our increasingly complex and consumerist culture. Yet at school, they are denied the opportunity to develop responsibility, express their social maturity and shape their learning as social actors in their own right (Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace, 1996; Frost, 2007).

Empirical studies in student voice research (Mitra, 2001; MacBeath *et al,* 2003; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Morgan, 2006; Pedder and McIntyre 2006; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; Thompson, 2009) have demonstrated the important practical contributions of student consultation for school improvement among those teachers who have seriously considered students' perspectives. Listening and learning from student voices necessitated a shift from the ways in which teachers engaged with students and how they perceived their own practices.

Across the aforementioned studies, teachers and students reported that their relationships, communication, and learning had noticeably improved. Students had mostly expressed a stronger commitment to learning and developed a sense of identity as learners (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). The qualitative impact of consultation on students' learning enhanced and improved their motivation, attendance, positive attitudes towards learning, capacity for responsibility and new roles, and perceptions of teachers.

Cognitive-Constructivist Learning Theories

Students have their own knowledge and skills which they have constructed through learning experiences. In this section, we are purposed to demonstrate that through learning, students acquire specific knowledge, which empowers them to have capacity to participate in curriculum decisions. Since space limitations prevent an extensive discussion of constructivism, in addition to those cited in the following paragraphs, interested readers are referred to the works of von Glasersfeld (1989, 1981), Jonassen (1991), Marra and Jonassen (1993) and Rorty (1991). In brief, there is no single constructivist theory. Constructivist approaches to teaching and learning is grounded in several research traditions (Perkins, 1991; Paris & Byrnes, 1989). The roots of constructivism may be traced back to a little known Latin treatise, De antiquissima Italorum sapientia, written in 1710 by Giambattista Vico (as cited in von Glasersfeld, 1991). Vico suggested that knowledge is knowing what parts something is made of, as well as knowing how they are related. "Objective, ontological reality, therefore, may be known to God, who constructed it, but not to a human being who has access only to subjective experience" (p.31, von Glasersfeld, 1991). A second, related path to constructivism comes from Gesalt theories of perception (Kohler, 1924) that focus on the ideas of closure, organization and continuity (Bower & Hilgard, 1981). Like Vico, Gesalt psychologists suggest that people do not interpret pieces of information separately and that cognition imposes organization on the world. Theories of intellectual development provide a third research tradition contributing to the notion of cognitive construction (e.g. Piaget, 1971; Baldwin, 1902, 1906-1911; Bruner, 1974).

Developmentalists believe that learning results from adaptations to the environments which are characterized by increasingly sophisticated methods of representing and organizing information. Developmental scientists also forward the notion that children progress through different levels or stages which allow them to construct novel representations and rules.

A fourth line of research depicts learning as a socially mediated experience where individuals construct knowledge based on interactions with their social and cultural environment. Like Piaget and Bruner, Vygotsky (1978) believed that the formation of intellect could be understood by studying the developmental process. However, like Bruner, Vygotsky felt that intellectual development could only be fully understood within the sociocultural context in which the development was occurring.

Current conceptualizations of constructivist learning focus on the 3rd (developmental) or 4th (social) line of research. The two lines of research do not represent opposing perspectives, but rather differences in focus. Where developmental constructivist tend to focus on the individual

and how he or she constructs meaning of the world around him or her, social-constructivists emphasize the group and how social interactions mediate the construction of knowledge.

It is from this foregoing that we argue that by the time the learner has acquired knowledge and skills from learning, he should be able to share that accumulation of knowledge and skills to the curriculum development process.

Meaning of Curriculum Change

To capture what it takes in involving students in educational enterprise, we begin by explaining the meaning of curriculum change. In order to understand curriculum change, a key concept in this paper, we first need to elaborate what the term "curriculum" entails in the light of existing literature. While there are many ways to define curriculum, Moyles (2003) views curriculum as organization of school subjects and the allocation of times when each subject are taught as depicted upon the school timetable. Hensen (2010) and Aker, Kuiper and Wand (2003) give etymological definition of "curriculum" as steaming from a Latin word which literary means "racecourse" or plans for learning. Hansen (2010) further gives a wide range of definitions of the term as a document that describes the school's outlined programs for learning and planned actions for instruction, a list of sequence of courses to describe a particular program of studies, school planned experiences or every planned aspect of school's educational program and all learning opportunities provided by the school.

Since the word "curriculum" has been portrayed in a generic sense that embraces everything that touches students' life in and out of school settings, the term "Curriculum change" should therefore mean a process of reforming, re-designing or re-structuring documents, content, experiences and activities which learners go through in day-to-day life in and out of school premises. Addressing the issue of educational changes, Lane and Epps (1992) stipulated that the concept of restructuring has come to encompass a myriad of educational problems, programs and philosophy. They also consider restructuring as a metaphor for educational change that conveys the image of starting anew, of changing not only content but also form, of shifting from thinking with the old order to inventing a new order that is found on new assumptions, values and vision.

Forces that Demand Curriculum Change

Shiundu and Omulando (1992, p. 131) once said: "there is nothing like the perfect curriculum for all ages. As the environment changes and societies portray new needs, the curriculum must keep changing to address these needs." Because of this, curriculum and its reforms have received increased attention in international policy in recent years as a means of making education relevant to societal changes (Olibie 2013). While there are many forces that demand curriculum changes, especially in the contemporary time, economic and technological pressures cannot remain unmentioned.

Starting with economic forces, Hanushek and Welch (2006) have it that economic growth determines how much improvement will occur in the overall standards of living society. They

also maintain that a more educated society may lead to higher rates of invention and may lead to more rapid introduction of new technologies. They conclude that these externalities provide extra reason for being concerned about the quality of schooling.

Technological forces for educational changes, on the other hand, can be seen in the fact that currently "schools are increasingly adopting the use of E-learning environment to increase their curricular and extend learning experiences for students" (Glatthorn, Boschee and Whitehead 2009, p. 395). Technological pressures have to do with modalities of current trends in which educational practices have now transformed to suit the needs of contemporary society. As argued by Taylor and Hogenbirk (2002), countries that do not integrate policies of scientific and technological development and education components will be left behind. This becomes a pressure that demands serious and immediate response from curriculum planners. According to Malewski (2010, p. 173), "to say that change can be manifested by technology innovation is to state the obvious. And in this case, it is significant to remind ourselves that the obvious is often overlooked."

It is important to also note that we are living in the world of evergreen students. Evergreen students are referred to by Wilen-Daugenti and McKee (2008) as learners of early adult age (18-26) who are typically the first to adopt new and emerging technologies and bring them into college campuses. These kind of students expect their schools to have appropriate infrastructure to support the latest technology which include but not limited to social networking facilities such as blogs and wikis, online video, YouTube, iTunes, smart phones, and many other intelligent devices. This kind of situation requires teachers in higher education and perhaps in all other levels of education to change and be digitally literate. According to Gagne, Wager, Golas and Keller (2005, p. 209), digitally literacy means "the ability to understand and make use of Information and Communication Technologies." Digital literacy on the side of the teachers will remove the gap between evergreen students and educators who do not know how to operate electronic appliances, failure to which will cause "digital divide" - the gap between individuals who have reasonable opportunities to access technology, especially internet and those who do not" (Ibid.) The breaking of this gap will only be possible if teachers, students and all stakeholders accept technological-related changes and update themselves by reading books, attending short courses and be part of new technologies.

Needs Assessment for Students Involvement in Curriculum Change
The issue of getting students involved in curriculum planning is not new. It can be traced far back to the idea of Kilpatrick and Rugg, child centered curricularists who outlined the role and concepts of curriculum making that involves students in planning themes, units, lesson plans and school projects that allowed for considerable student input (Ornstein and Hunkins (2009). The phrase "considerable student input," however, suggests some limitations of how much students can and should be involved in the change process, but does not deny the fact that students' voice must be heard and affected accordingly. McNeil (2009) supports that students' voice has much to contribute in what is taught and what takes place at schools.
Ornstein and Hunkins (2009, p. 241) further consider students as important sources for curriculum development. They contend that students "… should have a voice in curriculum

development. Their input is important in its own right, but allowing them to participate in curriculum development also empowers them and encourages them to take responsibility for matters that concern them." Although research of the 1980s looked at students as active participants in their own education, too little has happened to enhance the role of students as members of the school as an organization (Fullan, 2001). In response to this weakness, wide range of available literature indicate demands for students' involvement in curriculum change and detrimental consequences of disengaging students' voice in curriculum change.

Fullan (2001) for instance, indicates that students have been ignored in the change processes in that when adults think of students, they regard them as mere potential beneficiaries of the changes rather than participants in the process of change and organizational life. He then says that unless students have some meaningful role in curriculum change enterprise, plans will fail because disengaged students lack a meaningful personal connection with teachers and consequently they lack the motivational capacity to become engaged in learning. Glatthorn et al (2009) argue that adoptive and instructional practices demand students' involvement in developing their own curriculum. They further maintain that involving students in curriculum development encourages them to explore the topics they study deeply and allows them a voice of their own as well as opportunities to share their learning with community, and makes them refreshed and revitalized as they experience the benefits of their own initiatives.

Failure to engage students in curriculum change process has some detrimental effects in teaching-learning transaction. This is revealed in a study by Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace (1996) in Fullan (2001, p. 158-159), which indicates comprehensive summary of potential consequences of disengagement as perceived by students themselves. Disengaged students:

- Have characteristics that tend to make it difficult to achieve academically. These include giving up easily at school work.
- Are more likely to be fed up with schools on a regular basis.
- Find homework difficult, given they are often struggling in class.
- Dislike subjects with a high proportion of writing (e.g., English) and dislike subjects where they do not understand (esp. modern languages).
- Are more likely to have been involved in bullying incidences.
- Perceive teachers as generally unfair to students but particularly unfair to them.
- Consider teachers to be largely responsible for their future at school.
- Are more likely to plan to get a job before finishing their academic programs.
- Are perceived by many of their engaged peers as a hindrance and annoyance to their own classroom work.

Due to these detrimental effects of disengaging students in curriculum changes, there is need to actively engage students in curriculum planning.

Curricular Theorists and Student Voice

In order to place current practice in perspective, it is important to review the historic role of the student in curriculum development. Since this is a brief overview, rather than an in depth analysis, we have been selective in which curriculum theorists we discuss. It is not the intent of

this review to rank curriculum theory perspectives as to their incorporation of students in the discussion, but rather to give an overview of how different theorists have touched on the concept of student participation. As one of the founders of modern educational thought regarding curriculum, it is appropriate to begin this discussion by focusing on the work of R.W. Tyler. His approach to curriculum is quite rigid. He proposes a hierarchical structure where all curriculum can be addressed through four simple steps. The position presented is that curriculum is constructed using these steps, and then is applied to the students in the classroom (Tyler, 1975). However, even in this traditionalist perspective, the need for student empowerment in curriculum planning is apparent. Tyler (1975**)** recognized that students needed to be engaged by the instruction they receive and that:

> If a school activity is perceived as interesting and/or useful for his purposes, he enters into it energetically, whereas if it seems irrelevant or boring or painful, he avoids it, or limits his involvement as much as he can. I have found that observing and interviewing students when they are actively engaged in learning things they think important help me to develop initial outlines for experiences that will help these students learn things the school seeks to teach. (p. 28).

While Tyler's perspective on curriculum theory has been influential for much of the twentieth century, in the last few decades, various scholars have challenged his views. An influential Canadian scholar, T.T. Aoki, addresses, specifically, the need for consideration of the curriculum as it is lived out in the classroom. In order to move beyond the position of curriculum as plan, Aoki emphasizes the importance of educators shifting the perspective of themselves and others. By shifting perspective and language, education can move towards a curriculum that has room for the "otherness of others" (Aoki, 1993, p. 44).

Paulo Freire, another influential curriculum theorist brings forward similar concerns to Aoki. He is critical of a common approach to education, one which he describes as a banking system, wherein the students are not perceived to have knowledge of their own, but must instead have it bestowed upon them by educators (Freire, 1993). He instead puts forward a new libertarian perspective, one in which students play an active role. The reason for 'being' of education, in Freire's view, is to eliminate the apparent contradiction between teachers and students, "so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (p. 2). To overcome the depository form of education, Freire argues that education must involve the posing of problem solving questions that incorporate the consciousness and world view of the learner.

The final theorist to be reviewed, is also perhaps the nearest to asking questions specific to student participatory action. This may in part be a product of being the most current theorist in the field, as he had the opportunity to benefit from, and build upon the work of the earlier theorists. This theorist, Eisner (2001), has written more directly about the role of the student in curriculum development. His questions grow out of a reflection regarding how factors such as external assessments influence a classroom teacher's decisions regarding curriculum. Often these external sources can weigh more heavily on decisions that are made in the classroom, then the needs or desires of the students. While reviewing this topic he asks the question, ""'what opportunities do students have to formulate their own purposes and to design ways to achieve them?" (Eisner, 2001, p.371).

Conclusions and Recommendations

A curriculum which equips students for the challenging world of the twenty-first century needs to ensure that students are supported to take increasing responsibility for their own learning, their physical, personal and social wellbeing, their relationships with others and their role in the local, national and global community. The notion of 'student voice' helps meet the objectives of developing the interdisciplinary skills vital for such a curriculum. It also ensures that the needs of individual students guide the design of personalized learning plans. As students progress through school, they need to be encouraged and supported to take greater responsibility for their own learning and participation. This involves developing as individual learners who increasingly manage their own learning and growth, by setting goals and managing resources to achieve these.

Research has indicated that changing societal attitudes and views of young people over several decades has led to the development and refinement of the concept of student voice. Further studies have suggested that student voice, when it involves students having a genuine say in their learning, has served as a catalyst for positive change in schools. Positive outcomes include: helping to improve teaching and learning; improving teacher-student relationships; increasing student engagement with their learning; and raising student self-esteem and efficacy (Fielding 2001; Mitra 2003, 2004; Rudduck & Flutter 2000).

Drawing on this review, it is clear that student voice initiatives need the support of the whole school with the whole school culture supporting the processes and follow up around student voice. Finally, a lone teacher in a classroom using this approach may become frustrated and so too might the students if they see no general support for what they have to say, and no opportunity to influence school decisions and decision makers.

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