

Exploring Unequal Power Relations within Schools: The Authenticity of the Student Voice

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Abstract

The literature examined within this review criticises the validity of the current student voice work and initiatives occurring within schools. The authenticity of student voice comes into question as the various unequal power relations within school environments leaves students inferior to teachers and school leaders. This creates a significant implication for minority students, because they are unable to analyse critically the current school environments. In order for schools to become a more supportive working environment, teachers and school leaders need to release the power they currently hold and be open to a new pedagogical structure developed by a variety of students.

Keywords: *Student voice, Power, Participation, Students as Researchers, Student Silence, Relationships.*



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Introduction

The New Zealand Curriculum aims to ensure all school students become “connected, actively involved, lifelong learners”, who are empowered by their peers and teachers (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 37). Student voice projects and initiatives within school educational reforms have been tipped as a successful way to improve all students’ schooling experiences, particularly those who struggle to connect with the current system (Mitra, 2004). Many schools, particularly within New Zealand, have developed opportunities, such as student councils, to create opportunities for students to incorporate their views (Bourke & Loveridge, 2016). These opportunities emphasise the importance of engaging students in school decisions to help improve the educational outcomes and achievement of all students (Lodge, 2005). Typically, student voice projects actively involve students in the facilitation and management of the educational system, where their views and conflicts are given equal weight with those of leaders within the school (Robinson, 2011). Numerous educational inquiry tasks within New Zealand incorporate some shape or form of student voice within them (Education Review Office, 2014); however, it is difficult to find schools that explicitly restructure school policies, practices, and assessments due to the empowerment of student voice. Furthermore, many teachers understand the importance of student voice, yet fail to successfully enable students to voice their opinions within the teaching and learning process. Teachers often feel that student voice projects and initiatives contend with the expectations of

school and curriculum leaders, thus try to avoid fully implementing these (Bourke & Loveridge, 2016). The misalignment of student voice combined with prehistoric school structures, creates an imbalance in power between students and school leaders at various levels, which constrains the extent of students becoming actively involved and connected (Robinson, 2011).

The current literature and research on the containment of the effectiveness of student voice due to power imbalances appears to be limited within the New Zealand context. For this reason, this critical literature review will focus on a number of case studies undertaken in various contexts throughout the United Kingdom, as well as a single case study in New Zealand. These case studies are particularly important when addressing the limitations felt by many minority students within the New Zealand education system (Bishop, 2003); particularly when addressing the cultural mismatch in achievement currently observed within New Zealand schools (Nusche, Lauveault, MacBeath & Santiago, 2012). Through explicit revision of these case studies, this review will examine a number of ways that school teachers and leaders exercise their power, both implicitly and explicitly, to ensure students remain inferior education participants (Sellman, 2009). This paper focuses on the various types of power currently displayed within schools, why student voice is not accurately acknowledging all students, and how student voice can become more effective.



What is Power?

The word power is often associated with one's ability to influence another less dominant individual's opinion, behaviour and values (Vlčková, Mareš, & Ježek, 2015). Power within the current educational context represents the struggle between unequally positioned individuals, which renders one individual as powerful and the other as powerless (Nelson, 2017). Sellman (2009) describes this relationship in terms of a transactional process, whereby teachers are in control of curriculum links and teaching styles, and students are oppressed receivers of selected information. Because of this, power continuously operates through differing forms of pedagogy that regulate and control students' freedom and choice within educational spaces (Nelson, 2017). Furthermore, the repetitiveness of this transactional process throughout students' education journey, creates a "culture of silence" (Friere, 1971, as cited in Robinson, 2011), meaning that students often refrain from questioning or rebelling against the norm. Power within education is therefore continuously re-made through education processes and relationships to ensure that the rituals of school environment remain stable (Nelson, 2017).

Unequal power relationships within educational institutions are likely to have an impact on student voices in numerous ways. These relationships reduce the honesty of student opinions and feelings, as students say what they think teachers want to hear, rather than what they instinctively feel (Robinson & Taylor, 2013); meaning that schools are not hearing the true opinions and needs of students. In all cases examined within this study, the education leaders, teachers, and staff were committed to ensuring students could voice their opinion in an effective manner within the school environment. However, as examined in this review, it appears that educational institutions exerted their power, both visibly and invisibly, by determining the nature, implementation, and outcomes of projects. It is, therefore, important to consider the implications of teachers' and school leaders' choices, especially with a particular focus on the impact this has on students' freedom.

Authoritarian Power

The institutionalised roles developed within society and educational practices often causes an asymmetrical relationship between many school leaders, teachers and students (Mitra, 2008). Robinson and Taylor (2013) argue that the pre-historic norms of teachers, whereby teachers were held accountable for students' learning creates a power imbalance between students and teachers. This potentially causes students to perceive student voice projects in a way that does not actively allow them to selectively address the norms and practices that may be impacting on their ability to progress and achieve. Instead, students tend to address minor issues, as they trust that teachers are doing their job and are selecting the best options with regards to the major pedagogical issues (Robinson, 2011). Therefore, numerous student voice projects whereby students selected the topic to focus on, critiqued something that was irrelevant to pedagogy and assessment. This negatively impacts students' ability to successfully address and implement changes that will identify and contest the current teacher superiority in schools.

Design Processes That Silence Students

The complex processes within schools typically make it difficult for teachers to recognise how their decisions and choices create a dominant culture that can implicitly and explicitly silence students' voices (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Furthermore, it is often difficult for many teachers to understand the procedures required to actively include student perspectives that will initiate effective changes (Sellman, 2009). Teachers are typically unaware of the numerous oppressive micro-processes that students experience when voicing their opinion (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Many of the participating teachers in the research asked for volunteers, whereby students are granted the choice whether they will participate or not (Nelson, 2017; Robinson, 2011; Sellman, 2009). On the surface, a volunteer system seems free of any student biases and appears to encourage all students to participate. This system displays a hidden unequal power, whereby students who fit the culture, which the school enforces upon them, are significantly more likely to volunteer than are others (Robinson, 2011). The academic nature of these projects further implies to students with social, emotional, or behavioural difficulties that they will not be successful in helping the school. Furthermore, many teachers emphasise the academic nature of student voice initiatives by selecting students who are seen as capable and engaged, implying to other students that they are not academically smart enough to produce effective change to the school environment (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Therefore, volunteer and teacher selection creates a skew within the data of student voice initiatives, whereby the results obtained continually favour the dominant culture of teacher superiority already present within the schools (Sellman, 2009).

Students who volunteer, or who are selected, to voice their concerns or ideas about school policies and practices are often asked to do so in a room that already holds some sort of hidden power. The neo-liberal nature, already displayed within schools, makes it difficult for students to question the ideologies, beliefs, and norms (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Robinson (2011) discussed the difficulties of accurately engaging students in these initiatives due to the prior history of unequal power relations and silencing within school classrooms and staffrooms. The rooms chosen typically encourage a transactional process, which ensures the teacher is the most powerful individual in the room (Sellman, 2009). The selection of these rooms by teachers and school leaders ensures that students only question those ideas that they know teachers will approve of (Nelson, 2017). This implicit regulation by adults within school environments to actively regulate social interactions between more powerful students ensures that these students resist questioning the unstated values, norms and beliefs of the school, and adhere to the school culture enforced upon them (Robinson, 2011). This, therefore, makes it difficult for students to develop a connection with the school that enables them to create a democratic working environment, that ensures all students are empowered.

Idiosyncratic Power and Misalignment of Values

The pressure placed on students, who participate within these projects, often reinforces the idea that they must fulfil this opportunity to a predisposed level (Robinson, 2011). This is often

influenced by many teachers and school leaders showing disagreement about the effect that these projects can have (Morgan, 2011). Although some of the research examined did not look at teachers and leaders' preconceptions, those that did found that many teachers questioned the value of such projects, making it difficult to include students in a more authentic way (Sellman, 2009). This preconception may never be communicated to the students; however, due to previous authoritarian styles within schools, students are likely to feel disempowered when given these opportunities. This desultory commitment by all teachers with relation to student voice projects, encourages the idiosyncratic nature of power to exist (Nelson, 2017). The idiosyncratic nature of power emphasises to students that they should not hold any views about curriculum values, and instead conform to the pedagogy of the classroom teacher. This creates a difficult situation for many students, who are often unaware of the nature of these projects, especially because teachers typically do not address this. Within the research examined, no teachers explicitly identified the nature of the project to students (Nelson, 2017; Robinson, 2011; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Sellman, 2009). Nor did they identify the ability for students to re-examine the processes of pedagogy they currently experience within schools. This failure to address teachers as learners and students as facilitators of school improvement, makes it difficult to identify the success with which student voice projects may have on the positive shift towards a democratic school environment (Nelson, 2017).

Students perceived impairment to fully grasp the concept of these initiatives, is often evident in their inability to focus their attention on meaningful discussions that question classroom and school spaces (Nelson, 2017). When students genuinely wanted to articulate an idea they felt needed addressing, they often struggled to conceptualise the idea in a purposeful manner that encouraged discussion (Sellman, 2009). Furthermore, teachers and researchers failed to help guide students to explicitly examine their thoughts, feelings, and emotions with their peers. Instead, guiding questions often reinforced pedagogical and institutional power relations previously developed, whereby students listened to the adult and replied with the expected answer (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). This ensured discussions were based around ideas the teachers expected students could address, rather than those that involved higher-order thinking (Robinson, 2011). Teachers typically used scaffolding to constrain the ideas and discussions students produce to ensure students remained the inferior participants within the education system.

Explicit Barriers

The activities involved to address student conflicts within classroom pedagogy and school practices often fail to progress further than the peer activities schools provide (Mitra, 2008). When students willingly engage to review in a critical manner the normalisation of unequal power relations currently occurring, they often feel further disempowered by the explicit silencing of adults within the school (Robinson, 2011). Students are often eager to present their ideas and findings to school peers, leaders, and teachers to ensure that schools become a more inclusive environment; however students are rarely granted the opportunity to present these findings in a meaningful way. Typically, students who are given this opportunity to present their issues with

teachers, often felt teachers perceived the students to be dissatisfied, further disempowering their ideas (Sellman, 2009). Furthermore, these projects are rarely granted with importance, thus there is typically long gaps between student meetings and student presentations, resulting in a loss of interest from students involved. Thus, the current nature of schools to prioritise teachers' ideas above students' ideas, makes it difficult for students to stand up and display behaviours that do not conform to the culture of the school. Instead, students who have previously queried the ideas, concepts, and behaviours of schools, are typically classed as students with behavioural issues who are actively silenced (Robinson & Taylor, 2013).

Furthermore, students who present their findings to an audience and are granted the opportunity to change school norms, are quickly informed that changes are only temporary (Robinson, 2011). Thus, students are further oppressed by student voice initiatives to ensure that teachers and school leaders are viewed as the dominant figures who make the permanent changes observed in the school. This ensures students remain spectators while teachers are empowered to sustain their choice-making role within the school environment (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). For this reason, although the nature of these student projects was to increase the student voices and enable all students to connect with school culture and curriculum, students were instead limited by teachers' and school leaders' comfort zones.

Power imbalance - the Student Voice?

The current reform within the education system to engage students in the facilitation of school system appears to have reached a stalemate, as teachers and school leaders often fear that students will harm school morale (Sellman, 2009). The literature has highlighted several key points about current issues within the facilitation and implementation of student voice projects. To implement a successful democratic environment, teachers need to review their application of group work, to ensure that students build supportive relationships with their peers to allow comprehensive discussion to be developed (Mack, 2012). Teachers also need to work with students in an explicit way to recognise the dominant school culture currently at play, and the ways they can dismantle this through supportive engagement (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Thus, to create successful student councils, teachers need to acknowledge students' power, and how they can use this to break down the current complex interactions. Furthermore, schools need to be willing to recognise all students as equals, and try to develop students' identities to help break these power imbalances. In this way, students who previously have been disengaged by the school culture and curriculum are empowered to give feedback to ensure they are challenged critically, within a positive learning environment (Sellman, 2009). The ability for schools to allow students to challenge the unequal power relations through student empowerment will improve teacher-pupil relationships, and through this, learning becomes a way of negotiating and working together, rather than facilitating a transfer of knowledge (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). The key, therefore, to schools developing an effective democratic environment, begins with teachers releasing some of their own power to help empower their students and build effective working relationships (Robinson, 2011).

Conclusion

The current educational reform within New Zealand recognises the importance of the student voice and engagement with regards to school practices, policies, and assessments. This literature review, along with the research examined, has recognised the current unequal power issues within schools that are affecting the success of student voice projects. Although schools' intentions are generally positive, it appears that the prehistoric nature of education within the western world is affecting students' abilities to negotiate and to discuss their concerns, feelings, and ideas about the school environment (Robinson, 2011). Further research about how school leaders and teachers can break down these barriers would provide researchers and educators with practical methods on how to ensure students experience a positive learning environment. Student voice research needs to speak more explicitly with students about how they feel about the micro-processes at play, as there is currently still a large amount of presumption within this research about how students truly feel.

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