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“Students as partners in cyclic continuous curriculum design”

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Abstract

The 2007 revision of the New Zealand school curriculum (NZC) requires individual schools to design curriculum to reflect the needs of their local communities through consultation with their communities. For most schools ‘consultation’ has meant keeping parents informed of developments the school has decided. However, Southbridge School has adopted a more proactive and courageous approach inviting parental and student input at each step of the curriculum design process. Regular conversations about learning have enabled parents, students and teachers to work as partners to shape the evolving curriculum. Such conversations closely mirror the action research cycles of plan, act, develop and reflect to show parents and students that their contributions matter. This paper addresses one aspect of this partnership, the students’ contributions referred to as student voice and participation in the literature. The paper will highlight the value of student voice, the strategies adopted by Southbridge School to seek student voice and suggest future possibilities.

Data for the paper are drawn from two student engagement surveys, focus group interviews with students and observations of student participation in curriculum development meetings. This paper is an account of how the school has developed its local curriculum, (named the 2020Vision project), to attract and sustain student voice in its development. Attention to the student voice is believed to be critical if schools are to equip students with the knowledge, competencies and values needed for citizenship in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

The principal function of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) (2007) is to set the direction for student learning and to provide guidance for schools as they design and review their curriculum. Schools are left to design their own processes for developing their local curriculum. Southbridge School, (a rural New Zealand primary school), has welcomed this challenge as an opportunity for parents, teachers and students to work closely together to share ideas about what learning programmes would best suit them and how these might be developed.

Community engagement is one of the principles in the NZC. It is argued that the curriculum has meaning for students when it connects with their wider lives and

engages the support of their families, whanau and communities (p.9). However, the majority of schools interpret this community engagement as one of keeping communities informed about developments the school has decided. Informing is quite different from active engagement or consultation. Similarly students, while being the very reason for a school curriculum, are frequently absent in discussions of what their learning needs are and how a school curriculum might be designed to make that learning occur.

Literature on student voice and participation in school curriculum

Literature on student voice in curriculum decision making for schools exists but mainly with a focus on secondary schools. Typically this literature has addressed the topic of student voice through the school council structure and one-off competitions for secondary-school age students to design a school of their dreams. Corresponding literature specifically for primary school contexts is sparse.

Groundwater-Smith (2007) suggests seeking student voice is an essential testimony for intelligent schools but for most schools consultation is rare and students’ ideas are not taken seriously (p.113). However, Groundwater-Smith reports some exceptions, particularly in the UK and Australia, where schools have developed systematic policies and practices to enable students’ voices to be heard and have even given students agency in designing, investigating, analyzing and interpreting studies of learning. Studies on student voice spanning over a decade have been listed by Groundwater as emanating from the work of Rudduck and Flutter, 2000,2004; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; MacBeath, Demetrius, Rudduck and Myers, 2003.

In searching the literature two articles were sourced on the role of student voice strategies in developing more effective teaching and learning in the classroom (Tait & Martin, 2007; Flutter, 2007). Other articles featured justifications for listening to and heeding student voice (Hamilton, 2006) and clarification of what student participation could mean (Holdsworth, 1996). All of these aspects have relevance to the Southbridge School case study which is the focus for this article and serve to justify the stance taken by the case study school in inviting student participation in curriculum decision making.

Just one account of the power of student voice in curriculum development and decision making has featured as an article from a New Zealand primary school. Co-authors Tait and Martin (2007), (principal and deputy principal) explained what they and their teachers had learnt from asking children questions about their learning. They wrote, ‘over and over again, we have been literally astounded by the messages the children are giving and how powerful it is to truly listen to what they say’ (p.37).

Tait and Martin had interviewed a random sample of 80 students using video to record their responses to what they thought successful learners did. This evidence was collated into an hour of footage for the staff to view. When the video was viewed, the staff realized that the students in their school had no idea what learning was, let alone what they had to do to be successful at learning. The teachers subsequently set about trying to remedy the situation so that students could talk about what learning was and how they might achieve it. This was first and foremost about learning the language of learning and talking about the qualities of a lifelong learner. They wrote that the language of the classroom had to change from the language of behaving to the language of learning.

Subsequently a repeat video interviewing a further 80 students, including some of the same children interviewed previously, produced better results. Sixty percent of the second sample could easily discuss successful learning in terms of the qualities of lifelong learning. While admitting that further work was still needed, the next step was for individualized coaching sessions to be set up for the teachers to examine pedagogical practices that appeared to be making the difference and for them to share this one with another. After careful analysis of what the students actually said, the teachers realized there was a continuum of development that the students moved through in their use of this learning language.

The continuum included an initial stage of parroting back the language of the teacher, while a final stage was one of internalization where the students could speak about themselves as learners with examples from their everyday lives. The personal ownership of that understanding was clearly important. Since that video data gathering, the power of the student voice has become an extremely important source of evidence at the school. Tait and Martin even argue student voice is 'the major change agent in our school' and claim they are 'reworking [their] pedagogical approach to ensure the students can solve problems and investigate their ideas independently; so it is them we approach as a means of finding out what they could do and what they thought' (p.37). This is exactly the intention of the NZC key competency of self management. Therefore it is indeed an exciting development to recognize a move from shallow to deep to profound learning as evidenced by the students' abilities to converse about their learning.

The writing of Flutter (2007) has also informed understandings of work undertaken in the case study of Southbridge School. Flutter justifies the inclusion of student voice in decisions about curriculum design and delivery. She suggests 'the basic premise of 'pupil voice' is that listening and responding to what pupils say about their experiences as learners can be a powerful tool in helping teachers to investigate and improve their own practice' (p.344). Such insights enable teachers to view learning from the students' perspectives. Thus Flutter argues, 'the cornerstone of

teacher development lies in extending teachers' knowledge and understanding to enable them to practice their art more effectively' (p.345). Student voice strategies are therefore one way of extending such knowledge and understanding. This requires a reciprocal exchange between teachers and students.

Similarly, Hamilton (2006) purports 'ability to listen to the student voice is the most significant enabling factor for the building of caring, empowering relationships in the development of a learning community' (p.128). This argument is underpinned by the theory of enactivism which emphasizes learning in a connected environment. Not only is the voice of the learner valued but it serves to develop shared meanings and understandings as teachers respond more effectively to student needs. Hamilton cites Ruddock, 2004, who maintains:

When student voice is really heeded, students feel respected, understand their views make an impact, have greater control over their learning – in that they are able to articulate their learning, and devise methods of improvement – and generally feel more positive about school. Teachers, too, have an enhanced opinion and understanding of student capabilities, and are more likely to change practice in accord with their increased understanding of their students. Hence they exhibit a renewed zest for teaching (Hamilton, p.134).

However, it is not enough to talk about student voice without giving consideration to the concept of student participation. Holdsworth (1996) suggests the word 'participation' has been used in various ways in education. He suggests it can mean taking part, having a say or an active sharing in decision making. Student participation must involve activities that are valuable and make sense to the participants, the community and meet the academic or curriculum goals that schools are required to achieve. Otherwise participation remains tokenistic.

A further caution is made by Groundwater-Smith (2007) with regard to the ethical issues surrounding the inclusion of student voice in practitioner research for schools. She suggests these issues 'revolve around vulnerability and the extent to which young people may be manipulated or coerced ...[and] the competing accountabilities and the ways that these are played out in the many and diffuse practices of the school' (p.113). Such concerns are certainly warranted given the novelty aspect of student voice as a data source for school improvement. Also noted here are the risks involved when inviting student voices to contribute to discussions about what schools might look like. The findings from an Australian study by Howard and Johnson (2000) suggest that students themselves can be conservative forces opting for the status quo while others might be wishing for more radical and innovative ideas about schooling designs. It is argued that perhaps it is unrealistic to expect that innovative ideas will come from the students when their current experiences are the

only ones they have experienced and the invitation to imagine alternatives might even endanger their present successes (p.8).

The case study school

Southbridge School is a small New Zealand primary school with 7 teachers and a roll of approximately 140 students. It, like all New Zealand primary schools in 2009, is developing its own local school curriculum to satisfy the Ministry of Education mandate for implementation in 2010 following the release of a new national curriculum document (New Zealand Curriculum, 2007). Community engagement is one of the principles underpinning this document to ensure the 'curriculum has meaning for students [and] connects with their wider lives' (p.9).

This school is unique for various reasons. One reason is that this school takes consultation seriously and values a regular exchange of views from parents and students. These groups are actively involved rather than merely being informed about matters decided by the principal and teachers. Another reason is that the principal of the school has sought the partnership of researchers at the University of Canterbury to research the development and process used to design a local curriculum. While it is unusual for a school principal to make such an approach, this principal has used this strategy before with one of the research team and found that school development projects have been enhanced by research-mentors collecting additional data and providing analysis to inform next steps by the school. The focus for this article is a description and critique of the student voice and participation in the process of developing and implementing what has become known as the 2020Vision.

Data gathering at the case study school

The data reported in this paper include document analysis of school newsletters, observations of the principal's leadership, a student engagement survey and several focus group interviews with the students. These data highlight the formal systems which the school has created to involve the students in decisions about their learning at the school. It includes the principal's intent and how this is experienced by the students themselves.

Evidence of conversations about students' learning

Talk about learning is deliberate, planned and a regular feature of the school day at Southbridge School. The students welcome opportunities to talk about their learning and what they value. The principal conveys his very real interest in the students' learning and achievement in a variety of ways. His efforts are recognized and appreciated by the students who see him as accessible, fun and concerned for their welfare. Peter, the principal, encourages talk about learning through his daily interactions with students. Even as they use the road crossing outside the school he takes the opportunity to show an interest in their learning by

talking and asking questions about learning. Visits to the classrooms are a daily occurrence and similarly notice is taken of what interests the students and their stories often serve as a catalyst for making connections with wider school happenings. Often mention is made of a student's story to illustrate learning and a sense of wonderment. Such connections are important.

Peter also emphasizes the importance of talk about learning with celebrations of achievement at the weekly assemblies and newsletters to parents. His leadership is often invitational making suggestions for parents to converse about some aspect of the school's learning at home. The parents respond to questions or statements included in the school's weekly newsletter. For example, in one newsletter he wrote a piece entitled a valuable experience. It said:

"I'm heartened by some of the conversations I've been having with our children about things that are important – the values by which we live our lives. You've seen in this newsletter that values have become a feature of our learning over the past few months. All children have been exploring what it means to be responsible, caring, respectful, sharing and so on. Our studies have included many opportunities for children to role play how these values look in real life. Children in Community Two have made posters with photos of themselves modeling some of the values.

Even more interesting are the examples our children can describe of how they put these values into practice. Yesterday Jessica Carter talked to me about how she helped a group of young children find ways to include others in their game. The group was too big for them all to play, they said. Jessica advised them to make the group bigger then split the game in two. What really impressed me was that Jessica went back later to check how the game was going and if they needed more support. Could I have done that at Jessica's age? Could you?

Talk to your child about their values studies at school. Even better, take opportunities to notice and support good values happening around home" (Excerpt, School Newsletter, 27 November 2008).

By making these conversations visible to a wider audience, Peter is able to explain the rationale for particular aspects and at the same time invite the parents to participate in consolidating that learning or taking it to the next stage.

Student involvement at School Development Days

Students have also been invited to participate and share their learning experiences with teachers and parents at school development days. At the October 2008 day, a

small group of students made presentations and joined in small group discussions. This was a bold initiative but one which made a clear mark in the sand. It was a further indicator that Southbridge School values its student voice and participation in learning. The students' presentation included showing a video they had made about learning at Southbridge School in which they had interviewed younger students with three questions. These questions asked:

- What they liked about learning at Southbridge School?
- Why? and
- What things they would like to change or have added to make learning at Southbridge School better?

The inclusion of the student voice was a highlight of that day and served to remind all of the adults present that the students were the reason for the school's existence. Subsequently each of the students participated in the discussion groups focusing on aspects of the school's programme such as literacy, numeracy, inquiry and information communication technologies. The smaller groups made it easier to ask the students questions about what was valuable learning for them. The students handled these interactions with ease and were clearly pleased to have an audience and the reward of a catered lunch!

We interviewed two of these students ten months after their involvement at this 2020Vision day. These students perceived their involvement as letting the adults present know what learning was occurring at the school and what the teachers were teaching them. They believed that what they shared at that day indicated that the students were being taught what they needed to know using a variety of learning experiences. Both of these students found this experience fun after their initial nervousness. They were confident that they would not have been invited to participate had the teachers not considered their work to be good enough. In addition to their presentation, these students worked in smaller groups with the adults. They felt that the adults listened to their ideas and noted that some even wrote notes. However, one challenge they faced was understanding the terminology used by the adults. Neither of the students was familiar with the term 'curriculum' which was used repeatedly throughout the day. The students were reluctant to interrupt and ask what it meant. Yet even without a precise understanding of this term, these students had a vague idea that curriculum was about subjects and the circle of life and that those present were interested in talking about what was currently happening, what was good and ought to be continued, what could be improved and changed, and what was just right. These discussion points were in fact the intent of the 2020Vision.

Student Engagement Survey

While the previous example highlighted the involvement of a small group of students, the student

engagement survey was administered to all of the students. This survey entitled "Me and Southbridge School" was another attempt to ask the students about their learning, relationships with teachers and peers and sense of wellbeing at the school. This survey was an adapted version of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) "Me and My School". This survey was administered class by class by the researchers who read out each of the thirty-two items for the students to indicate a 'yes, no or mostly' response. For the youngest children, the researchers worked with pairs of children rather than as a whole class group. The items captured cognitive, behavioural and emotional aspects of learning.

This survey was first administered to all of the students in 2008 and repeated in 2009. The ratings for both surveys remained much the same across the two years with little variation for most of the items. However, there were differences in seven of the thirty items with two items having improved ratings in the 2009 survey and five having decreased. We counted items with a difference of six percent in our analysis. Three items showed the greatest differences between the two survey iterations. Two of these showed decreases while one item had an increase. One of these items related to the level of difficulty in schoolwork and used the words 'not too hard, not too easy, it's just right'. We noted that the complexity of the wording, despite our link to the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, confused some of the students. However, if the rating for this item includes 'mostly' it shows that 92% of the 2008 respondents and 91% of the 2009 respondents considered their learning levels to be at least 'mostly satisfactory'. Similarly for another item when the 'mostly' ratings are combined the results showed 97% and 95.7% respectively thereby eliminating concern about the decrease for the enjoyment of learning new things. We were puzzled by the discrepancy in a further item which used the words 'I am interested in what I am learning at school' and produced a difference of 9.5% even when the 'yes' and 'mostly' ratings were combined.

We believe that the school should feel affirmed by the student ratings of their engagement in learning. However, we are inclined to think that more was gained by drawing the students' attention to the items included in the survey to highlight that others did care about the cognitive, behavioural and social barriers and enablers to learning than tallying the response ratings. We believe that the administering of the survey enabled a nice link to be made with four of the key competencies in the 2007 New Zealand Curriculum, namely; *managing self* and taking some responsibility for one's own learning and decisions about engaging in learning, *participating and contributing* within a community of learners, *relating to others* recognizing that learning is helped by communications with others, and *thinking*. Furthermore we believe it is the visibility of the 'language of learning' that is crucial. Students need to know what it is teachers expect of them and recognize what it is that teachers do to facilitate learning, monitor

achievement and what role they as students might have in making that learning happen.

Needless to say, the survey had its limitations as the students were not asked to supply reasons for their responses to the various items. To counteract this, the researchers devised another set of questions for focus group interviews with six children which are discussed in the next section.

Focus group interviews on student engagement with learning

Three focus groups (with N=18 as a combined total) were held to cater for a sample of the older, middle and younger ages of students in the school. Class lists were supplied by the principal and the researchers returned the lists taking every sixth student on the lists and then made adjustments for a gender balance across the total sample. Parents received an information letter and were asked to sign consent forms for their children to participate. Before starting each interview, the researchers similarly explained the purpose of the interviews and how those students had been selected. Again the focus group interview experience was novel for the students as they were taken out of class into the staffroom for the interview.

We looked for patterns and differences between the responses of the three age groups. Our opening question explored what the students found fun about their learning at Southbridge School. While all three groups were in agreement that school was fun, the reasons given were not the same. For example what contributed to being 'fun' was not always clear, particularly during discussion with younger students. The middle school aged students identified friendships as being of significance, while the older students highlighted appropriate levels of challenge, unpredictability and variety in method and topic as important factors in positive classroom programmes.

We asked the students to tell us about their contributions to school learning. We found that relationships with others contributed to students' experiences and levels of engagement. They needed to feel they belonged, their achievements recognised and able to ask for help when they needed it. Friendships contributed to the ways in which students participated in class (e.g., whether they completed homework activities or engaged in alternate activities), and determined whether school was fun. Relationships with teachers and teaching approaches were also important, particularly for older students. While younger students focused on pleasing teachers and receiving rewards, middle school and senior students regarded teachers as of importance in determining appropriate levels for students to work at, and providing them with a strong base for long-term goals that included preparation for College and extended beyond school years. They appreciated having explicit goals and knowing what knowledge and skills were needed to reach a particular level.

Students drew on a variety of indicators to signal their enjoyment, and to determine whether members of the school community liked them. Younger students used visible indicators, such as smiling, being happy, being eager to arrive at school and being on time. Older students made more subtle distinctions and identified elements of peer and teacher support and the nature of interactions and quality of schoolwork as ways in which interest might be communicated. The older students also valued opportunities to be actively involved in aspects of the school's programme and community, and positive interactions with others as contributing factors to their enjoyment of school.

Exploring home-school connections revealed particular ways in which the students interpreted our questions. When asked about the importance of teachers being aware of their lives outside school, the younger students were vague in their responses. They talked of family events and general aspects of home life. Middle school students focused on specific elements such as safety, absences and incomplete homework. The older students more clearly articulated the value of communication in terms of supporting learning, and saw different purposes in home and school activities, but also made clear connections between more abstract school learning and application at home (e.g., learning to tell the time at school and then using it out of school). Younger students focused on school-like activities as learning at home. Students generally reported that parents supported their learning through scaffolding and correcting homework activities, rather than focusing on non-school related learning. The place of homework in these students' lives changed over time. Younger students saw homework as an important indicator of what they needed to learn. Older students talked about the optional nature of homework and held contrasting viewpoints. One homework viewpoint advocated the importance of homework justifying it as an opportunity for additional practice and feedback on school-related learning. The other viewpoint was of homework as an optional activity that was not as valuable as play.

Lord's (2006) review of research on student perceptions of the curriculum, beyond the surface of 'fun' (enjoyment) and 'interesting' (relevance), generally reflects what we found from interviewing the Southbridge students. The Southbridge students valued having clear connections between school learning and real life, appropriate levels of challenge, practical learning experiences, and clear and supportive teaching approaches.

Focus group interviews with students on student committees

Three focus groups were held with students from Years 5 and 6 (N=18 as a combined total) who held places on the student committees. We discovered that the school had five student committees each with 10-12 members and covered topics such as the environment, assembly, sports, fundraising and the library. The students could apply to join these committees in the final two years at

the school (Years 5 and 6). To join a committee, students are required to submit an application form and covering letter explaining their reasons for applying. Year 5 students can only serve on the environment and library committees. No student could serve on more than two committees and all selections were made by the Deputy Principal. The students believed that her decisions were based on their level of responsibility, the quality of their applications and their ability to relate well to others. All committees were chaired by Year 6 students and a teacher was attached to each committee in a supporting role. The students considered that they came up with ideas and then consulted with their allocated teachers. Three committees met weekly in lunchtimes, while there were less frequent meetings for the fundraising and assembly committees. Committee membership was highly valued by the students. The students did not usually seek opinions of other students but suggested that others could contribute ideas when they were older and could join the committees.

The students identified generic within-committee responsibilities which included attending meetings, being positive role models, managing their time as they completed work for the committees and working alone or with others on small tasks. Those on the assembly committee believed they were doing a good job overall as the teacher on the committee had ceased to ask if they were prepared for each assembly. During the assembly committee members operated the projector and laptop, selected music and managed the sound system. They also sat alongside classes to monitor the noise levels and provide behaviour guidance!

Members of the environment committee talked about their short and long term goals. They were involved in field trips and small projects such as the worm farm, school gardens, selling second hand items and vegetables they had grown to teachers and students. Rubbish collection was also monitored and recycling encouraged. In both of these areas prizes are awarded. Their decision making related to how to spend the profits from their tree and plant sales and running a competition for a school-wide logo to identify their committee.

Students on the library committee talked about their responsibilities for opening the library, keeping the library tidy, shelving books and chasing up books when the teachers did not return them. They also ran competitions to encourage other students to come to the library or to read more. A class tree competition had involved book reviews (written on leaves) with prizes awarded to the class with the most reviews.

The fundraising committee planned around school events and raised money for charities of their choice. Some of these events, such as the school disco, were initially organized by adults (The Home-School Committee) but students' input was actively sought around themes, selecting a charity, and making posters and decorations. The committee members articulated the factors that had contributed to their choice of charity

which had recently been the Westpac Rescue Helicopter. They knew there was a demand for this service and it had benefited a lot of people, one of whom had been a teacher at the school.

The sports committee took responsibility for arranging activities and games in the lunchtimes and the Sports Days. Members set up the equipment and led students to particular activities as well as mentored other students who might take on tasks in future committees. They also made suggestions to teachers about sporting ideas for inclusion in class programmes.

Members from all of these committees could articulate their achievements and further work they could do. There was also a real sense that their committee work was making the school a better place for the students. These ranged from having a tidy and green environment, satisfaction gained from helping others, devising strategies to help make learning fun and taking responsibility for equipment in assemblies, and modeling appropriate behaviours for students at assemblies to ensure its smooth running.

Conclusion

These examples of student engagement in learning highlight an exciting range of opportunities for primary school aged students to develop leadership skills, responsibility for others and caring behaviours towards one another. Together these experiences demonstrate that schooling is not just about addressing cognitive needs but that the emotional dimensions of being respected, welcomed and appreciated matter as do the behavioural needs of living in a community where effective relationships can enhance learning. Each of these dimensions is made even more visible through a school-university research partnership which draws attention to the ways in which all those connected to a school and its community can continuously plan, act, develop and reflect on what is happening and plan for its future. Our interviews, observations, document analysis and surveys have all contributed to this raised consciousness for the teachers, parents and students. In this way the 'language of learning' is indeed a motivator for involvement and commitment to what this school has called the '2020Vision'. Attention to the 'process' aspects of how to make these connections is the basis for very effective consultation which impacts on students' learning. The development of a school-based curriculum is not just about the curriculum content. It is a way of learning about what learning is through community involvement.

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