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From Article 12 to Student Voice and beyond - making children's rights real in the English classroom

Andrew McCallum
London Metropolitan University (UK)

Abstract

This paper draws on the experience of teaching on a rights-respecting teacher training course to explore how students training to be English teachers to 11-16 year olds can draw on Article 12 of the UNCRC, which states that "the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child". In doing so it examines the possibilities offered to English teachers by the term 'student voice', generally used as shorthand for Article 12. It suggests that trainees must explore how to enable the articulation and reception of student voices within their teaching, but it also contends that they need to extend their notion of voice beyond that of the students to take into account a 'community of voices' at play in the classroom, made up of student voice, teacher voice, narrative voice and critical voice.

Introduction

'Student voice' is an apposite aspect of the children's rights agenda with which to work when planning how to approach the training of English secondary school teachers on a rights-respecting teacher-training course. English as a subject is well placed to deal with the issues of identity and 'being heard' generally ascribed to the term. The National Curriculum programme of study for English (QCDA, 2008), for example, gives over much of its space to 'speaking and listening' and also encourages teachers to select texts for study that reflect a range of cultures and traditions, which can easily reflect the multiple identities often found in contemporary classrooms. This paper looks at how trainee English teachers on a one year rights-respecting PGCE course (the most common entry qualification for secondary teaching in England) at London Metropolitan University (LMU) might position 'student voice' in their own classroom practice, while also considering how they can look beyond the term to more usefully conceive of a 'community of voices'. It draws on ideas for approaching voice work developed for teaching the course, as well as the responses of trainee teachers themselves.

'Student voice' is common shorthand for Article 12 of the UNCRC (Lundy, 2007), which states that "the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child" (UNICEF, 2008). A literature review of the subject's use in education, however, reveals that far from being applied to "all matters", the term is generally attached to very specific extra-curricular areas of school life. These areas seek student participation in a structured manner, using activities associated with citizenship education in general; for example, in work linked to student councils, to students as researchers and students as observers. Interestingly, many of those actively involved in promoting student voice work over the past decade or so have also written articles problematising its use in practice (Fielding, 2001b; Rudduck

and Fielding, 2006; Bragg, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2007; Fielding, 2007). Each of these student-voice practitioners comes to qualify the claims he or she makes for the potential of student voice, concluding that the term can be limiting rather than liberating. One way this occurs is that its use reduces multiple voices to one single 'student' voice. They also suggest that the construction of *student* voice necessitates it being set in opposition to *teacher* voice. Additionally, the authors point out that projects tend to recruit students from particular backgrounds, often the more educationally engaged; these voices, in turn, can be positioned by schools so as simply to mirror the views of the school management. Each article prioritises dialogic practice in its recommendations as to how to overcome these problems. It is my contention, though, that the authors need significantly to re-conceive their notion of the place for student voice if such dialogic practice is to have the potential to allow students to express themselves in "all matters". With this in mind, the rest of this paper will sketch out a framework for conceptualising (student) voice developed to encourage trainee teachers in secondary English at LMU to adopt a rights-respecting approach to their classroom practice that moves student voice beyond how it is used in current educational discourse.

Problematising student voice

There have been several attempts to offer structured approaches on how to combat problems faced in student voice work. Three examples stress the need to conceive of voice dialogically and offer frameworks for doing so. Lodge sketches out four stages of engagement with voice work, each an improvement on the previous one. These are using student voice as a form of quality control in inspection processes, using it as a source of information, using it to gain compliance and using it dialogically (Lodge, 2005, p 126). Fielding, looking specifically at student voice in projects which use students as researchers, offers a similar four part model. In these stages students are "sources of data" when practice is poor, followed by "students as sources of data", "students as active respondents" and, finally, "students as researchers" (Fielding, 2001, p 135) Lundy offers a slightly different model, which suggests that simply translating Article 12 of the UNCRC as 'student voice' does not itself advance the rights of young people. She proposes that for the article to be effective any application must take into account "space", "voice", "audience" and "influence" (Lundy, 2007, p927). Each approach proposes greater dialogism and a flattening of the hierarchies existing both in student-to-student and student-to-teacher exchanges. For example, Lodge explains that dialogue "is more than conversation, it is the building of shared narrative" (2005, p 134) and Fielding calls for

> an expectation that teacher learning is both enabled and enhanced by dialogic encounters with their students in which the interdependent nature of teaching and learning and the shared responsibility for its success is made explicit (2001, p 130).

Little consideration is given, however, to what dialogic practice might actually constitute, particular if it is to be incorporated into general classroom practice rather than restricted to extra-curricular student engagement activities. Trainees at LMU are encouraged to explore such practice in its relation to the work of Robin Alexander on dialogic talk (Alexander, R., 2008). While his work focuses on the structure of

everyday, planned talk in the primary classroom, he draws on the work of Bakhtin and of Vygotsky to make it clear that these small moments of interaction feed into a much wider theory of dialogic practice with a focus on meaning and meaning-making:

> For Bakhtin dialogue is essential to discourses – to a world – where meanings are neither fixed nor absolute, and where the exchange, acquisition and refinement of meaning is what education is centrally about. Indeed (to link Bakhtin to his compatriot Vygotsky) dialogue is about helping children to locate themselves within the unending conversations of culture and history. With dialogue comes identity (2008, p.25).

Student voice work, when it is restricted to the formal scenarios mentioned earlier, risks limiting the conversations available to students and those eligible to take part, even when it is structured dialogically. The subject of English, in the opportunities it offers to explore and create meaning, be it through textual analysis, creative writing, formal writing for a range of purposes, discussion work, performance, storytelling, the reading of canonical texts, the reading of texts from a range of cultures, the analysis and production of media texts, or through any number of other activities, has the potential to move beyond the limitations. It can do so, trainee English teachers are encouraged to consider, through seeing voice not just as involving verbal exchanges between students and teachers, nor indeed as regarding voice as only involving the articulation and reception of sound, but as existing in anything and any situation which generates meaning as it comes into contact with human activity. Such activity is the very stuff of lessons which, within a rights-respecting framework, must seek to involve all students "in all matters affecting the child". How, then, best to involve these students in "the unending conversations of culture and history"? What follows explores how this might be done through reconceptualising *student voice* as a *community of voices*, consisting of *teacher voice*, *student voice*, *narrative voice* and *critical voice*.

Teacher voice

If teachers are to structure classrooms as communities of voices then they must attempt to understand the construction of their own voices, both in terms of how English teachers *per se* are positioned culturally and of how, as individuals, they come to embark upon a teaching career. The construction of teacher voice begins well before trainees enter the classroom. Thus one of the first activities trainees undertake is to write a learning autobiography, detailing their own educational 'journey'. They are given little guidance as to how to approach the piece other than that they should focus on how their own learning was constructed. A significantly large number of trainees focus on the influence of a single teacher in their development. Comments such as the following from the class of 2008-09 are commonplace:

> It was not until my eleventh grade year… that I began to love reading again. This sudden change was due to a wonderful teacher named Mr Haller and his choice of literature for the class curriculum.

> … then a new teacher came into the school, Mrs Theodore. It was a fresh start. I remember English lessons clearly from then on. You always hear clichéd success stories about how some teachers have the ability to make you see things differently and (I apologise for the cliché) Mrs Theodore was a perfect example of this.
>
> My early encounters of English in the classroom were relatively dry and dull affairs which fortunately improved greatly with the start of my GCSE course. My English teacher at this stage, Mr Selby, proved to be an enthusiastic and affable educator, who seemed adept at introducing us to the themes of the various texts under study.

Such comments show a distinctly non-dialogic attitude, conforming to the notion embedded in popular culture of individual, 'inspirational' teachers connecting with individual, disaffected students, who can themselves then take on the teacher's inspirational voice. While not wishing to deny trainee teachers the possibility of being inspirational, their autobiographies are used to stimulate reflection on whether they have offered an accurate account of their own learning. Using Jerome Bruner's work on autobiography (Bruner, 2006) they are encouraged to reflect on how they may be conforming to socially constructed perceptions of what an English teacher's background ought to be, perceptions which restrict agency in the learning process and insufficiently acknowledge the role of student voice. Additionally they are given Paulo Freire's autobiographical "The Importance of the Act of Reading", which outlines how in his own literacy development "reading the world" precedes "reading the word" (1987a, p.35). Several trainee English teachers present personal histories in which there is no existence before "the word". "My earliest memory of books is also my earliest memory, period", writes one; "I cannot remember not being able to read", comments another", mirrored by a third's "I can't remember not being able to read". Whether or not their memories are accurate is irrelevant. The inclusion of such comments suggests an attitude which privileges the word over the world, with potential consequences for how student voices and teacher voices are positioned in the classroom.

Student voice

Much of the work on the course around student voice examines dialogic talk and how it can be managed in the classroom. However, trainees are also encouraged to consider the possibility of voice lying *within* students in the thought processes they apply to what is brought into the classroom and in how this interacts with their prior experience of the world. Joy Alexander suggests a revised model for structuring the teaching of English (2008). At present, the National Curriculum for English (QCDA, 2008) pairs reading with writing and speaking with listening. The logic behind the pairings is clear: reading offers a model for writing and writing is designed to be read; when speaking takes place, listening is required. Alexander, however, suggests pairing reading with listening and writing with speaking. She does so with particular reference to the place of listening in the curriculum, suggesting that it is only through carefully listening to particular written forms, such as poetry, that young people begin to attach meaning to those forms and so read them with greater understanding. Using this model, reading must be directed

towards encouraging listening, be it through giving thought to how a text might be read aloud to draw out meaning, or through reading individually, in silence, while 'listening' for a voice operating within the text. Thus students are encouraged to listen for a voice *in* a text and in doing so they come to place a voice *on* a text.

Trainee teachers are encouraged to draw on Alexander's work to develop a lesson which focuses on exploring voices in and on texts. One example which, like Alexander, engages with poetry teaching, suggests how a young person's *dialogic imagination*, to borrow Bakhtin's term, can be activated by reading a poem alone and in silence, then developed to include the responses of a whole class. In this model students first read a poem individually, focusing on what the poem means to them and trying to imagine how it would sound if read out loud. They then pair up to discuss their initial thoughts, using these to develop a spoken reading of the poem. This done, the pair perform their reading to another pair, using this to discuss differences in readings developed so far. The whole class then engage in a discussion about the poem. There is nothing radical about this approach, nor the structuring of activities to extend from individual to whole class response. However, it counters the orthodox approach to much poetry teaching in England today. Poetry is taught a great deal to 14-16 year olds as part of the examination syllabus, with the consequence that teachers tend to impose a reading on students rather than allowing them to develop their own responses (Kress et al., 2005). In turn, the reading tends to focus on the technical attributes of the poem, its structure and component parts, with only limited focus on what it means. The model suggested by LMU students inverts this orthodoxy. They offer an approach that values the right of the student to generate his or her own meaning on a subject and to work in an environment that allows for that meaning to be developed as it comes into contact with a range of other voices.

Narrative voice

The class reader is widely taught as part of the English curriculum. Classes read and explore a single novel together. Teachers can exercise their own judgment in the texts they select for 11-14 year olds and, so, trainees are encouraged to consider the rights implications of particular choices. Once more this involves considering voices *in* literature and voices *on* literature. In the way secondary students are encouraged to focus on character development when studying a novel, it is useful to focus on how voice in literature emerges in the way various characters are constructed. Thus it is possible to conceive of students listening for the voice of a particular character, rather than for the voice of the text as a whole, as was the case with the poetry example (this does not hold fast for all poems, but it is quite common for a poem not to feature a character, certainly not in the developed sense of a novel). In studying two novels aimed at the 9-12 year old age range, trainees are able to develop an understanding as to whether some novels encourage a dialogic approach and so the generation of multiple meanings in the way they interact with readers, while others close off the possibilities for multiple meanings, certainly among younger readers without the critical skills to engage in a sophisticated reading that might, for example, deconstruct a text. The former, it is

argued, offers greater rights-respecting opportunities in the classroom.

John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006), recently produced as a film, is widely taught. Its narrator, 9-year-old Bruno, lives next to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where his father is commandant, during the Second World War. Bruno is so naïve that he fails to understand the purpose of the camp, befriending Shmuel, a Jewish boy on the other side of the fence who, aside from physically exhibiting the symptoms of starvation, is identical to Bruno in age, looks and interests. The novel is presented by the author as fable, so its inconsistencies can, to a degree, be overlooked. However, I would like to suggest that it represents a trend to dehistoricise children's fiction. The narrative voice offered to the child in this particular novel fails to recognise historical events to an extreme degree. Not only that, but the limited opportunities for dialogue in the novel are nullified; because Bruno and Shmuel are reflections of one another, in a sense they say the same thing. Dialogue is actually monologue. The Holocaust is shorn of all historical content, becoming a simple representation of the potential for human evil. Young readers are presented with a world lacking in complexity, empty in meaning beyond the simplistic establishment of the opposition of good and evil. As such it becomes difficult for the child reader to generate a voice on this novel beyond mimicking this opposition.

Of course, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* can still be read critically through exploring what might lead to a de-historicised account of such an event. Such a sophisticated approach, however, denies the young reader a direct, immediate involvement with narrative voice. To explore what shape such involvement might take trainees are given a second novel, *A Little Piece of Ground*, written by English novelist Elizabeth Laird in collaboration with Palestinian writer, Sonia Nimr. Set in Ramallah, it focuses on the lives of three young Palestinian boys, Karim, the middle-class narrator, his Christian friend, Joni, and Hopper, who lives in a camp, as they encounter Israeli occupation. The contrast in content to the first novel is coincidental (though the fact that this excellent novel has made little impact in English schools is surely worthy of further exploration). It is used because of the range of narrative voices generated in the text, as the young reader is offered the opportunity to engage with each of the boys. The reader is also challenged by the content of the novel, which includes strip searches by Israeli soldiers, torture, suicide bombings, the confiscation of land and wrongful imprisonment; all done sensitively for the 9-12 age group. In contrast to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, the novel is packed with contextual references, going right back to 1948. This is not to say that the novel should be read as history; rather it is to suggest that young readers have multiple opportunities to develop their voices on such literature. They are offered the opportunity to consider and play out roles beyond their everyday experience but integral to an understanding of the complexity of the world, just as the protagonists of the novel play out roles, every one of which requires them to negotiate their own perspective within the context of multiple perspectives. Bringing such a text to the classroom allows the trainee teacher to extend dialogic learning and to allow students to engage with voices stretching well beyond the classroom door.

Critical voice

Tellingly the first author to use the term 'critical pedagogy' in a textbook, Henry Giroux (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003, p 2-3), soon after refers to "a pedagogy of critical

literacy and voice" (Giroux, 1987, p 21). The engagement of voice, it seems, is central to critical pedagogical practice. It is also central, I hope to have shown here, to trainee teachers negotiating and constructing the practice of rights as pedagogical practice. For in applying a critical voice to everything they do – in exploring their own education and practice, in structuring lessons, in relating to students and in selecting teaching material – they can begin to construct a community of voices within a rights-respecting classroom. Such a classroom would conform to Giroux's own sense of the importance of voice:

> The concept of voice constitutes a focal point for a theory of teaching and learning that generates new forms of sociality as well as new and challenging ways of confronting and engaging everyday life. Voice, quite simply, refers to the various measures by which students and teachers actively participate in dialogue. It is related to the discursive means whereby teachers and students attempt to make themselves "heard" and to define themselves as active authors of their worlds. (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p.235)

I would like to end by suggesting that while teachers might privilege critical voice in their own rights-respecting pedagogical practice, it need not always – or indeed often - be the explicit focus of classroom activity. Too explicit or constant a focus on critical voice might simply be another way of imposing a teacher voice on how lessons are viewed, stifling enjoyment, creativity and un-self-conscious dialogue. The students' voice might not always be ready or prepared to be explicitly critical and, as Paulo Freire alerts us, "the students' voice should never be sacrificed, since it is the only means through which they make sense of their own experience of the world" (1987b, p 152).

Conclusion

What is offered here is by no means a comprehensive theory as to the place of voice within the English classroom. However, it is an attempt to to position voice not as something additional to the general school experience, approached through extra-curricular student engagement activities, but as central to the everyday activities of school life, particular to classroom practices. As such it looks "beyond" student voice, to a notion of voice as existing *in* and being imposed *on* "all matters affecting the child". In encouraging trainee English teachers to think in terms of a *community of voices*, it is my sincere hope that they will develop teaching strategies that are genuinely rights-respecting.

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