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Education for transformation: an evaluative framework to guide student voice work in schools

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ABSTRACT

In the context of neoliberal and neoconservative educational reforms, student voice work is faced with a number of potential difficulties in creating the conditions, skills and dispositions necessary for student empowerment. One of the key challenges is evaluating whether student voice initiatives are effective, relevant and transformative. Through a systematic literature review of contemporary student voice literature from the past 10 years, the article proposes an evaluative framework to measure the extent to which student voice contributes to socially transformative educational practices in primary and secondary schools. This framework suggests that transformative voice work should be dialogic, intergenerational, collective and inclusive, and transgressive. It argues that the interaction of these four themes forms a set of principles or building blocks which collectively underpin transformative student voice work. The purpose of such an evaluative framework is not to provide a normative benchmarking tool, but rather, to serve as a reflective dialogical tool that could guide teachers and students towards genuine transformation of institutional structures and individual practices as well as informing policy makers, practitioners and researchers.

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Introduction

Since the codification of children's rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the concept of student voice has been the focus of intense debate and discussion in the field of education. Broadly speaking, student voice initiatives involve the consultation of, feedback from and engagement of students in their education (Cook-Sather, 2014). Such goals emphasise ideals of freedom, autonomy and self-determination through the democratic participation of young people, offering broad appeal in Western countries. The result has been a rapid growth and proliferation of student voice initiatives in schools, as a diversity of educational stakeholders implement such initiatives in the hopes of improving educational quality. However, the varied motivations and interests of these stakeholders leads to differing and often conflicting perspectives on what counts as 'quality' in the field of education (Tikly, 2011). We argue along with others (see, e.g. Seale, 2016) that not enough attention has been paid to how student voice initiatives can be evaluated, and that as

a result 'student voice' has taken on many meanings and is used to fill a range of largely ideological purposes.

This article has two aims. The first is to gain an understanding of contemporary research in this field by conducting a systematic literature review of contemporary studies of student voice in order to ascertain how student voice initiatives can achieve social transformation. As a result of this review, the second aim is to develop an evaluative framework that identifies more transformative forms of student voice and by eliciting key attributes and principles of more transformative types of student voice work. While a number of evaluative frameworks have been proposed in the past (see e.g. Fielding, 2004a, 2011; Hart, 1992; Lodge, 2005), our evaluative framework moves away from a continuum approach and proposes a set of building blocks or conditions which together are required for student voice work to be transformative. At the outset, we recognise that student voice is a complex and contested construct that has largely been developed and defined in Western educational contexts. Recognising the significant limitations of proposing a one-size-fits-all evaluative framework, we offer this framework as a reflective dialogical tool to contribute to ongoing discussions and debates on the extent to which student voice is indeed transformative within particular contexts and situations unique to a school.

The article begins by exploring some of the tensions and difficulties faced by educators engaging in student voice work in the current context of neoliberal reforms to education systems. Applying critical and poststructuralist theoretical perspectives on student voice, it discusses the role student voice work can have in resisting or transforming structures and practices that perpetuates inequality, stand in the way of 'democratic human flourishing' or 'undermine the interpersonal foundation of our civic and communal practices and aspirations' (Fielding, 2004a, p. 198). The article will follow with a systematic review and synthesis of literature on student voice, resulting in an evaluative framework for educators to guide practice at a classroom and school level. The article concludes by discussing how such an evaluative framework could be used as a reflective dialogical tool that could guide practitioners and researchers.

Putting things into context: student voice work in times of education reform

The concept of 'student voice' has emerged within particular historical, social and discursive settings. At the outset, it is important to recognise the contexts within which student voice work in many high-income nations is enacted, as these contexts contribute to particular norms and practices in schools. Influential among current stakeholders in education are the distinct but aligned neoliberal, neoconservative and managerial middle class groups that are pursuing school reform, or what Michael Apple and colleagues (Apple, Au, & Gandin, 2009) have termed the 'conservative modernisation' of education (p. 10). Dominant in these recent educational reforms is a discourse in which schools are valued for their production of human capital, linking educational quality to raising outcomes on standardised measures of student achievement for its correlation with economic growth (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2008; Tikly, 2011).

Ball (2003) discusses this process in terms of a culture of performativity; performances, such as in tests,

serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of “quality”, or “moments” of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. (p. 216)

In many contexts, teachers and schools are under intense and direct pressure to improve students’ results in standardised assessments, resulting in the displacement of teachers’ identities and relationships with students in favour of ‘external contingencies’ (Ball, 2003, p. 222) and a kind of anxiety for students to perform displays of externally defined quality. The effect is a narrowing of the taught curriculum in classrooms to a focus on measurable skills relevant to assessments, positioning students in passive and receptive roles relative to teachers and assessment tools, which become the primary legitimators of knowledge and understanding (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). In practice, low-performing students are further marginalised and teachers are significantly less tolerant of students with particular learning or behavioural needs (Rustique-Forrester, 2005).

Therefore, while the goals of these conservative modernisers often align with ideals of social transformation, social mobility, empowerment and increased agency through education, the processes involved in achieving this pose significant problems for educators with an orientation towards equity and social justice because, among other things, they obfuscate structural inequalities through their emphasis on autonomy, self-regulation and individual responsibility for outcomes (Raby, 2014). Thus, despite the rapid propagation of student voice work in the past 25 years, there is a risk that the new ‘common-sense of society’ (Apple, 2009, p. 240) will lead these initiatives simply to reproduce and reinforce social inequality because of their focus on ‘possessive individualism’, and the dominance of ‘professional and managerial middle class’ (p. 241). Against this backdrop, a number of educators and researchers still hold significant hope for the potential of student voice and make recommendations for ways to proceed with student voice work that retains the initial promise of empowerment and social transformation. A key challenge is therefore to define and measure the extent to which student voice enables genuine transformation of institutional structures and individual practices (Seale, 2016).

Finding a socially transformative voice

Within the literature on student voice, what is meant by ‘voice’ is an important consideration that reveals much about the theoretical underpinnings of a particular study. Recognising the multiple potential theoretical approaches possible, we have confined ourselves for this article to examine two – poststructural and critical theoretical accounts. To begin with, many authors writing from a poststructuralist framework emphasise that voices cannot exist in a vacuum. Voices emerge only in connection to other voices, both in response and in expectation of a response, as well as through a shared history of use in similar contexts for similar purposes; in other words as ‘link[s] in a very complex organized chain of other utterances’ (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 104). Individual voices are understood as constructed in reference to a field of relations

and discourses, suggesting that they have available to them only the positions afforded to them by those fields: '[o]ur ideological development is ... an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 346).

This approach decentres voice, illustrating how students' voices are not stable, coherent or autonomous but instead are always contingent on their context. Such a view is common to feminist, sociolinguistic or cultural studies perspectives in which different registers of voice index social positions and identities within a particular socio-cultural historical context (Agha, 2005; Bernstein, 2003). For research into student voice work, this view carries with it a certain amount of pessimism, as one can easily conclude that students will simply reproduce the dominant voices in a particular space or discourse, therefore leading student voice initiatives to simply reproduce relationships of power and domination instead of providing alternatives or challenges to the established social order.

However, such a result is not inevitable, as voice is also 'the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness. A voice always has a will or desire behind it, its own timbre and overtones' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 434). In this sense, a voice has 'two sources', one emerging from the particular context with its underlying social order and hierarchical set of relations, while the other is 'the individual person speaking or writing here and now, projecting onto the words his or her own slant and thereby adding to the cultural and historical possibilities of those words' (Sperling & Appleman, 2011, p. 74). Thus, while voices are certainly subject to 'centring institutions' (Blommaert, 2005, p. 79) such as school, family and peer group that establish hierarchical orders of indexicality, speakers also 'align or distance themselves from other people in their social world through nuanced forms of voicing' (Maybin, 2013, p. 386). Maybin provides examples of this, showing how students at times demonstrate alignment by almost directly reproducing voicings, while at other times show more distance and less alignment through their own grammatical and prosodic cues. From a poststructuralist perspective, the implication is that while student voice work runs the risk of perpetuating or reinscribing structures of domination and inequality, students individually and collectively have linguistic resources and social strategies for subverting the hegemonic voices in their environment and these can be called on to transform the social order.

Another closely related or overlapping conception of voice prominent in the literature comes from the tradition of critical theory, drawing on materialism and neo-Marxism to theorise voice as a symbolic resource, an abstract form of capital or a kind of power over capital that is unevenly distributed among individuals and groups (Baroutsis, 2015; Bourdieu, 1993). Bourdieu (1993) described this interrelated distribution of power and capital as referred to as a 'field' and is structured by the

state of the power relations among the agents or institutions engaged in the struggle, or, to put it another way, a state of the distribution of the specific capital which has been accumulated in the course of previous struggles and which orients subsequent strategies. (p. 73)

The relationships that arise from this struggle are what give shape to the social order, an otherwise arbitrary hierarchisation that is not founded on any 'human reason', 'naturally endowed right', 'social contracts', 'consent' or 'universal principles'. (Swartz,

2013, p. 31). Critical to theories of voice is the idea that language is the primary mode of performing symbolic power, which is the power to determine the value of different forms of capital, 'or, if you will, power over the different forms of power or the capital granting power over capital' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 265).

From this perspective, the role of student voice initiatives in social transformation could broadly be said to facilitate students' engagement in dialogue and action that makes clear to them the conditions of their own lives. The goal of this in Žižek's (1989) words is to 'lead the naïve ideological consciousness to a point at which it can recognise its own effective conditions, the social reality that it is distorting'. Žižek describes this as a matter of 'see[ing] how the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification' (Žižek, 1989, pp. 28–30). In other words, to recognise that the world is necessarily structured by symbolic orders, that these orders are arbitrary and subject to change, and that an awareness of these conditions is the starting point for transformative change – a process Freire (1996) referred to as conscientisation. In doing so, students will develop the necessary critical awareness to recognise the fields in which they can contend for and accumulate symbolic power and, therefore, will be better equipped to empower themselves and collectively challenge established symbolic orders towards just ends.

Methodology

The creation of an evaluative framework for student voice is derived from the first author's literature review that sought to systematically search for, appraise and synthesise research evidence in the field of student voice in order to make recommendations for practice and identify what remains unknown (Grant & Booth, 2009). Fingeld-Connet and Johnson (2013) suggest that this type of review allows for 'implications for practice and policy formation [to] be inferred from resultant concepts or theories' (p. 195). However, we recognise that the meaning of transformative work within education remains highly contested. Wider historical, social, political, economic and discursive contexts shape both notions of how educational quality is defined and perceived as well as how it is researched (Tikly, 2011). It is important to note at this point that this article draws on literature in high-income, mostly English-speaking or European nations, and it is the social structures and inequalities particular to this educational context from which ideas of transformation are derived. The focus on these nations reflects the availability of published English-language research in this area, the bias in many publishing houses and reflects wider issues centring on the contested value of different forms of knowledge (Connell, 2007). While this analysis therefore speaks primarily to these contexts, we welcome discussions from wider contexts which could serve to advance upon the model proposed here in new and dynamic ways.

To conduct the systematic literature review, key words and their synonyms were identified and searches were carried out on the Education Resources Information Centre via ProQuest as this indexes a range of English-language studies and articles in peer-reviewed journals within the domain of education, with the initial aim of producing a search that yielded neither an 'unwieldy collection ... not well linked by expertly crafted topics and questions', nor 'too few studies or too few descriptively rich studies to render saturated findings' (Fingeld-Connet & Johnson, 2013, p. 197). Due to

the rapidly evolving nature of student voice work and theory searches were limited to material from 2005 to 2015, although exceptions were made for articles subsequently found to be seminal in the field.

When reading articles closely, some critical considerations were taken to ensure that articles ultimately forming part of the review were of high quality. Considerations included relevance; detail around how students were selected for inclusion in student voice work; availability of any data collected or primary sources used; supported by evidence and linked comprehensively to the wider body of literature; arguments and reasoning in-line with other literature or, if different, including a strong justification or backing for difference (Grant & Booth, 2009; Wilson, 2009). Articles were excluded if they were not relevant or had only minor focus on student voice or they did not consider the voices of primary or secondary school students. We also excluded articles which had used student voice merely for data collection purposes without any view towards making direct changes in their lives, or facilitating students to do so.

A final total of 80 studies were identified for analysis for this review and these were grouped and classified thematically according to the nature of the student voice work described (Berg, 2007). Through an iterative process, these themes were re-examined and renegotiated through our theoretical position founded on both poststructuralist and critical understandings of voice, in order to identify more critical and transformative notions of student voice (Fielding, 2004a). The systematic literature review analysis reveals that student voice initiatives should be *dialogic*, *intergenerational*, *collective and inclusive* and *transgressive*.

In line with the approach of other researchers, we drew on these dominant themes to create a framework that can be used to assist in designing, running or reviewing student voice work (e.g. of this approach, see Apte, 2009; Tikly, 2011). The four themes overlap and intersect, and in most cases are inseparable and integrally linked, but when taken together, they reflect the ways in which student voice initiatives should be configured to create the conditions for students to empower themselves. In what follows each of these will be discussed in detail, then presented as the basis for an evaluative framework to guide transformative student voice work at the classroom and school level.

Towards a framework to guide student voice work

Dialogic

Student voice initiatives must be *dialogic*, or, as Fielding (2004b) puts it, student voice initiatives must involve ‘speaking with rather than speaking for’ others. ‘Dialogic’ is used here in the same sense as Paulo Freire (1996) used the word:

dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action [praxis] of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanised, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s ‘depositing’ ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be ‘consumed’ by the discussants. (pp. 69–70)

This view of interaction is opposed to the instrumental rationality of human capital conceptions of education, in which ‘knowledge is (a) detached from everyday human existence and (b) intended to *control* nature, people, and social arrangements’ (Prasad,

2005, p. 144, original emphasis). From a critical theory perspective, dialogue and dialogic interaction has as its goal the flattening of social relations and an escape from the oppressive forces inherent to a hierarchically organised social order, all the while also being oriented towards action, making it the ideal starting point for transformative student voice.

If student voice work is to be dialogic, then power is what is at stake in any student voice initiative. However, in traditional, hierarchical classrooms, power is not shared evenly, not just because teachers exert coercive power, but also because teachers exert hegemonic power through being positioned as experts and authorities by educational institutions and the evaluative discourses of school. Furthermore, poststructuralist perspectives reveal the ways in which students themselves exert hegemonic and, frequently, coercive power over and among their peers, reflecting both the structures and inequalities in wider society, but also hierarchical identities specific to the school (Arnot & Reay, 2007). Within a poststructuralist analysis, Taylor and Robinson (2009) explain that the problem for voice is that power is not something that can be quantified and thus given away or shared, so attempts to empower students result simply in 'reinscribing hegemonic power relations and reducing [the voice work] to tokenistic intervention' (p. 166). In a subsequent study, Robinson and Taylor (2013) demonstrate this, showing how two initiatives were unable to elicit the authentic voice of the student over the voice of the adults involved. Similar results and concerns are expressed by other authors over the difficulty of dialogue in the context of discourses that position students as passive and teachers as experts and authorities (Anderson, 2015; Bragg, 2007; Lundy, 2007; Robinson, 2011).

This does not, however, mean that dialogue is impossible. The implications are that all participants in student voice work need to gain critical distance on their experiences and views, reflecting on them with an eye towards changing them in relation to those of others (Cook-Sather, 2007). Voice work must therefore involve a certain amount of critical training or education, as students (and staff) engaging in voice work must have the theoretical tools to understand the pervasive effects of power and knowledge in order to resist these (Taylor & Robinson, 2009). Participants must be willing and able to attempt a critical examination of the historical basis of their assumptions, values and opinions that enter into the dialogue in order to make explicit potential relations of force. This therefore makes central to student voice work questions of who is speaking, where, how, why, to whom and to what ends, and these questions will inevitably reveal relations of power.

However, Flecha (2011), and indeed the original critical theory position of dialogue, reminds us that such findings cannot excuse inaction. To this end, Cook-Sather (2015) suggests that, rather than differences of power, identity, perspective or position leading to inaction, such differences should be examined for their complementarities, overlaps and alignments. Where these are not present there must be compromise that acknowledges the validity of positions without seeking to integrate them. Finally, for participants of differing identities, Cook-Sather suggests seeking ways of connecting through the experience of difference and relative privilege, using this as a resource to further develop participants' individual voices, similar to what Smit (2013) describes as 'a continuous process of participation and negotiation of all stakeholders' (p. 555). Thus, instead of ignoring differences or subordinating them to an imperative for

collective action, difference can instead be examined for its potential as a resource to student voice work.

Intergenerational

A second theme that emerges from the literature around student voice work is that adults have an important role to play. If student voice work is to be dialogic then *intergenerational* relationships must be a central element of transformative initiatives. Unfortunately, many student voice initiatives are flawed at the outset in their constructions of children and childhood, either considering children as incompetent 'beings', or incomplete 'becomings' (Mannion, 2007, p. 407). Mannion discusses how many adults involved in student voice initiatives carry presuppositions that children are incompetent, irrational or unable to understand their situation to a sufficient extent for their voices to really matter, other than for their insider perspectives as children. These adults often view their role in student voice work as the experts carrying out an intervention that they need to do 'to children, with or without their genuine consent' (Marchant & Kirby, 2005, p. 94). Dialogue in this situation is impossible as young people are involved only as a means to achieving what are otherwise the ends of the adult leaders who retain power and exclude voices that they deem unacceptable, irrelevant or unintelligible. Conversely, Fielding (2011) provides concrete examples of the ways intergenerational relationships *can* be configured within a school towards increasingly democratic and participatory ends. Evident in his examples is the crucial role played by adults in student voice work.

Thus considered and thoughtful involvement of adults is crucial to the success of student voice work, particularly with very young people, because of the different ways in which young people best express their voices. For some young people, participation methods designed for adults are inappropriate: 'we know of children destroying, hiding and eating their review forms; crawling under the table at meetings where their futures are decided; colouring in their questionnaires (which then get discarded as unusable); and drawing all over their assessment checklists' (Marchant & Kirby, 2005, p. 94). Such outcomes of 'consultation' often lead adults to conclude that young people are incapable of voicing their opinions, that young people don't have anything to contribute, or that young people are unable to sufficiently understand the situation. However, this is not the case, nor are the outcomes described by Marchant and Kirby necessarily indicative of anything other than a rejection of the particular method of participation; and to an adult engaged in 'authentic listening' (Flynn, 2014, p. 166) such responses in themselves are a form of voice.

Adults therefore have a role in facilitating the participation of young people, but this must begin with an acknowledgement that the young people are more than capable of voicing their opinions, that their facilitation may not be needed at all, but also that they may need to work closely with young people to find a method of participation appropriate to their competencies (Lundy, 2007; Marchant & Kirby, 2005; Piper & Frankham, 2007). These authors and others (e.g. Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) suggest that this may mean finding a variety of innovative or novel methods through which students can participate, such as through photography, role play, storytelling, student-led tours, puppetry, music or dance.

It is clear from this that students' ability to participate in many cases is not only closely tied to the involvement of adults, but also that in many cases, adults' roles may call for significant interpretative work (Piper & Frankham, 2007). Cook-Sather (2007) describes this as process of translation, which requires of participants that they become 'different selves ... through the process of opening ourselves to students' diverse identities and perspective: as we translate – *with* students – those students' experiences and perceptions, we are ourselves translated' (p. 397). Fielding (2006) similarly refers to this as a kind of 'radical collegiality' (p. 308), which involves going beyond a reciprocity of topic and technique to teachers and young people learning from each other in holistic, co-constructive and collaborative ways.

The final point to consider on the topic of adult involvement is that decisions over the use and availability of spaces for students rest almost entirely with adults. For this reason adults' role in voice work extends to creating spaces for students to have a voice, as well as spaces for adult–student relationships and dialogue (Mannion, 2007). Kehoe's (2015) study clearly shows this, reporting on the frustration of the students and the researcher of establishing a space within which students can hold discussions free of adult intervention, which is nevertheless constantly intruded-upon by adults. His study ultimately fell well short of the intended goals as the student participants were significantly hindered in voicing their views and suggestions when asked to do so in the staffroom, in part because this is a very teacher and adult-oriented space. It follows from this that the space given for a relationship shapes the kind of relations possible, as Mannion shows. Consequently making spaces available beyond the traditional play and leisure areas given to students is a critical concern for teachers and schools engaging in voice work, both to allow student–student relationships and for meaningful and authentic intergenerational relationships to develop free of relations of force.

Collective and inclusive

If a student voice initiative takes social transformation as a start point then it must be collective and inclusive, providing all students the opportunity to empower themselves. However, student voice work in schools runs the risk of instead becoming a 'dividing practice' that excludes students 'whose voices are silenced because ... they don't fit the dominant discourse and academic aspirations of their schools' (McIntyre, Pedder, & Rudduck, 2005, p. 155). Much student voice work is carried out with small groups of students, often chosen by teachers because they fit within particular ideals of a good student (Keddie, 2015). Selection criteria of this kind reinforce existing relations of power within the school, rendering audible the voices of students already empowered relative to other students (Thomson & Gunter, 2007). Therefore a particular challenge in voice work is to include students whose voices may be difficult to hear because they are in a minority; they are difficult to understand; they are silenced in and out of school, by choice or by hegemonic or coercive forces; or even because the voices are aggressive, rude or obnoxious (Cook-Sather, 2014; MacBeath, 2006; Taylor & Robinson, 2009).

Much work has been done in this regard to highlight the potential of student voice work to reintegrate and facilitate the empowerment of students who are traditionally excluded or disempowered by the school system, including students who have been suspended or expelled, because these students in general want to feel listened to,

respected, cared for and to have adults and peers take a genuine interest in them (Kennedy-Lewis, 2015; Robinson & Smyth, 2015; Slakmon & Schwarz, 2014; Smyth, 2006). However, this is not easy and requires an explicit orientation towards inclusivity and collectivism.

This begins with a collective approach by the school and its staff. Mitra's (2006) study of three student voice initiatives reveals that student voice work positioned inside schools (as opposed to community youth groups positioned outside schools, for example) achieved more of the students' goals because they had the allegiance of the faculty, but the students were more limited in the power and authority that they could assume and their goals were far more conservative because the students feared repercussions of threatening teachers' authority. Similarly Kehoe's (2015) study provides a clear example of the limitations that can arise from a lack of broad staff support for the work, with students feeling nervous or intimidated by having to convince staff members of their ideas. Angus (2006) therefore emphasises that school leaders have to 'invoke student voice – insist upon, enquire into, try to understand, interrogate, and generate student voice as best they can' (p. 378) because such top-down support is crucial to the success of student voice work.

Much more problematic for transformative student voice work is the possibility of student empowerment only within a new, but still hierarchical and unequal social order. Bragg (2007) examines the presuppositions of many student voice initiatives, including 'authentic' ones, to reveal that they frequently frame responsibility in individual terms; create in students a high degree of self-regulation, self-policing and self-critique; enforce an affective identification with the school that emphasises to students that their role is facilitating school processes as they currently exist and exclude students attempting to subvert the process. Raby (2014) discusses how the focus on negotiation and participation in student voice work prepares young people to become ideal global neoliberal citizens: 'autonomous, self-reliant, responsible and able to personally negotiate risk and the marketplace without relying on state support' (p. 80). This suggests that the power and agency that student voice projects offer does not necessarily lead to emancipation or transformation of the social order, but simply represents a form of symbolic violence in which student voice plays an integral part in securing a more effective and efficient form of governing (Anderson, 2015). Such a view ultimately questions whether student voice work is simply a neoliberal middle-class project, and whether even successful and authentic initiatives with emancipatory goals will reinforce the inequality that they aimed to address.

In response to this, Raby (2014) argues for a 'democratisation' (p. 85) and collectivisation of the governmental mindset secured by student voice: she states that student voice initiatives must involve negotiation and recognition of the needs of others, individually and collectively; they must be linked to the group's broader goals or aims; and they must acknowledge and consider social inequalities with the aim of addressing them. To conclude, she suggests that there is no reason why the autonomy and agency offered by student voice cannot be re-oriented towards collective change. Indeed Maybin's (2013) study reveals precisely the way students' agentive voices can subvert rather than reinforce coercive power, which leads to the final theme of *transgressive* student voice.

Transgressive

A final and closely linked theme emerging in the literature is that student voice work can and does provide students with the tools or medium to resist, escape or transform systems that promote inequality. This runs counter to many student voice initiatives which lack the will, ambition or impetus to achieve transformation. They therefore fall short for a variety of reasons: schools do not approach the work with authentic intentions; teachers are subject to hegemonic and coercive forces to teach a narrow curriculum; teachers and students are concerned at the outcomes of overturning traditional power relations; or, students are more comfortable in passive roles (Kehoe, 2015; Lundy, 2007; Mitra, 2006; Robinson, 2011; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). It is clear from this that in order to succeed, student voice initiatives must be willing to effect real change and to cross or transgress traditional borders and power relations.

Given the many conservative forces at work in education, what remains is to discuss the aspects of student voice that resist the anxieties and limitations discussed earlier. To begin with, by facilitating students to cooperate and enter into dialogue with teachers other students, student voice initiatives are already resisting the current culture of performativity in education. Fielding (2004b) discusses the possibilities student voice offers as a 'rupture of the ordinary' (p. 296), representing in many cases a significant break with the current context of education. Meanwhile, Bragg (2007) and Keddie (2015) similarly report that many of the students in their studies welcomed the chance to participate in voice work as a chance to escape the pressures placed on them by a culture of performativity in schools. In this sense, student voice work can represent the kind of non-performative goal and focus that Chua (2009) suggests teachers pursue as a tool of resistance.

However, as we have seen, even the best intentioned voice work can still fall short of transformative outcomes because the dispositions and identities with which students align through the process of the work lead them to reproduce structures of inequality and oppression. Instead, Apple (2011) suggests that teachers create 'activist identities' (p. 27): if participation in student voice work is inevitably governmental as many authors suggest, then student participation must focus on creating 'skilled subjectivities' that challenge domination by 'conceptualis[ing] governmental processes as relevant to challenging domination' (Raby, 2014, p. 82). Student voice work must therefore allow students to 'acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the ethos, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible' (Foucault, 1989, p. 446). Thus, the morality and ethos of the voice work is crucial, linking closely to that of dialogue in requiring a commitment to collective action and change, or in other words, 'the functional ways we work together in schools ... should be transformed by the moral and interpersonal character of what we are trying to do' (Fielding, 2006, p. 301).

Beyond equipping students with the necessary tools for transgression, student voice work also reveals potential spaces and sources of oppositional discourse and action. Bernstein (2003) argues that social categories and discourses have inherent dilemmas and contradictions, most notably because of their arbitrarily hierarchical ordering which are made particularly clear to students in the tensions between the dominant 'voice' ... given by the category of teacher/pupil, and the students' own 'sub-voices

(gender, race, ability etc.)' (p. 24). Arnot and Reay (2007) develop this concept further, explaining that student voice work highlights these tensions and therefore provides the source of an oppositional discourse to what Bernstein describes as the 'dominant classificatory principles and the power relations that speak through them' (p. 28). Arnot and Reay state that this discourse arises in the context of voice work that calls on students to critically evaluate their own voices and positioning, suggesting that 'pupil voicings ... can offer insights into the rules which govern the organisation of teaching and the social inequalities associated with learning' (p. 318).

In a similar way, other authors discuss how student voice work reveals to students precisely the limits of their power and agency and thus highlights potential spaces for action. Robinson and Taylor (2013) explain that students understood that things like pedagogy and certain aspects of organisation were 'bigger things' (p. 40) over which they could have no power; the students in Keddie's (2015) study perceived limitations to what could be suggested; Flynn (2014) reports that students became aware of the ways in which their voice was limited in spaces outside of the school; meanwhile Bourke and Loveridge (2014) reveal that students have well-developed understandings of the point of learning, which didn't necessarily align with the school. In all of these cases, the voice work reveals some of the perceived and real boundaries inherent to local relations of power, and thus highlights the potential spaces to take joint action and effect change. Most importantly, Bernstein (2003) explains that students give critical consideration to the common-sense appearance of these boundaries because the 'natural order' (p. 24) is presented as logical and common sense despite its arbitrary classificatory rules and structure.

Applying the framework

The framework presented in Figure 1 is a visual representation of transformative student voice work that arises from this systematic synthesis of literature and research into student voice over the past 10 years. The figure should be read as a set of integrated foundational principles or attributes which, taken together, articulate a more transformative student voice. This builds upon a similar framework developed by Fielding

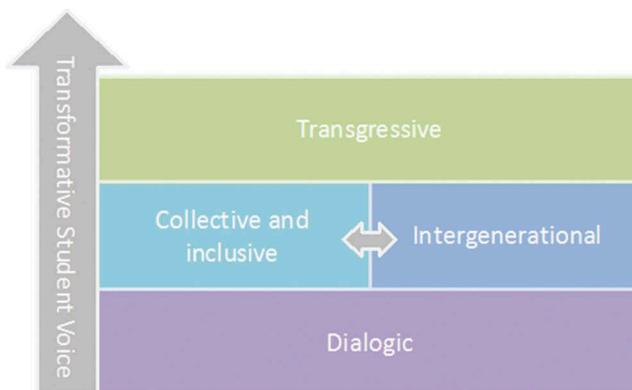


Figure 1. Framework for evaluating student voice work.

(2004a), who sets out a number of configurational and dispositional considerations that help ensure student voice work is oriented towards emancipatory change by including a more explicit orientation towards action. The framework differs somewhat from those put forward by Fielding (2011), Lodge (2005) or Hart (1992) as it is intended to be read as a series of building blocks that are required more widely for student voice work to be transformative. Collectively, the building blocks form a set of conditions, orientations, dispositions and pedagogic approaches for transformative work, rather than a hierarchy or continuum of outcomes as put forward by these authors.

Each element in the framework relies to an extent on the others, with the voice work likely to fall short of transformative goals should one of the elements be neglected. To begin with, the framework is structured and oriented by its *dialogic* nature; the general aim of voice work must be to establish relationships that are free from or that resist domination, otherwise teacher voices and the voices of some students will be heard over others as a result of the exact power imbalances that transformative student voice work aims to address.

Next, without an *intergenerational* element, student voice work is either ineffective because it lacks the support of those in positions of power within a school, or is simply an intervention done to students and therefore not really a form of student participation; in both cases students are disempowered, either practically in their ability to achieve their goals, or at the outset in having their goals decided for them. Meanwhile voice work without a *collective and inclusive* orientation offers agency without empowerment, or perhaps empowerment without freedom as students utilise their agency or power to regulate themselves and their behaviour to align with unequal and unjust social structures, rather than challenging them. Finally, voice work that is not *transgressive* cannot achieve social transformation because it will identify boundaries and limits, but students or teachers will be unable or unwilling to cross them.

It is important to acknowledge that this framework is not complete and carries with it a number of ongoing considerations. To begin with, student voice initiatives are necessarily grounded and sensitive to the local context. For this reason, the framework avoids being overly specific in terms of methodology or the particularities of relationships and structures beyond general considerations or guiding principles. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the vast majority of authors and studies reviewed here are in the context of urban, English-speaking schools in high-income countries which raises significant questions about the broader application of the issues discussed. Morgan and Sengedorj (2015) consider this, advising that student voice initiatives not be transported in total from one context to another. Unfortunately, the authors report, such initiatives are frequently taken to non-Western countries on a 'civilising mission', with presupposed notions of children, childhood, subjects and participation that are not applicable.

Our aim in suggesting this evaluative framework is not to provide a normative benchmarking tool against which student voice initiatives could be judged as 'good' or 'bad'. Rather we suggest that this could be the basis of a reflective dialogical tool that could guide teachers and students towards genuine transformation of institutional structures and individual practices within the specific contexts of a school as well as informing policymakers, practitioners and researchers. For example, a programme could be examined for the extent to which it enabled the four elements proposed. If one or more of these was found to be weak or absent, practitioners and students could

identify what more might be needed to enhance this area. Similarly, the framework could be used as a research tool to establish aspects of student voice work to examine. We encourage critique of the model as a starting point for further discussions to advance student voice research and imagination.

One further limitation to this framework is worth raising. While the review above gave brief consideration to some of the issues involved in definitions of adults and children, it is difficult to discuss student voice without making distinctions in some form, which in the case of this review has led to the construction of a specific kind of subject; as individual, rational and knowing. This construction is common to the vast majority of the literature, raising questions of how students (or adults) whose voices fit outside rational and ableist frameworks might be included, and indeed whether the framework developed here is applicable to work with these people at all. Several authors consider the ways in which a less stable and more radically relational conception of subjects within student voice work might avoid these issues (Cook-Sather, 2007; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Mannion, 2007). Important to such a conception of voice is the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) whose work aimed to break down distinctions between subjects, texts and the world. They showed how entities, objects and milieus connect and how, through the particular organisation of their connections, properties emerge that are not reducible to any of the constituent elements. Thus, rather than being rooted in a particular person, body, culture or location, voice in this emergent sense is radically contingent on the particular assemblage, which in turn is contingent on its connections to other local and global flows – of energy, ideas, capital, language, culture etc. Further work in the area of student voice could examine the potential of such a radically contingent conception of voice to develop a more inclusive or universal framework that is not so reliant on specific notions of children, childhood, adults and adulthood.

Conclusion

In all, student voice still holds significant promise if it is approached with authentic motives and proceeds with an ethos of care and compassion. It is important to acknowledge however that teachers and schools are significantly limited in their capacity to enact such transformative voice initiatives, as they themselves are subject to increasing coercive forces that require regular displays of ‘quality’ (Ball, 2003, p. 216), creating an anxiety that leads to conformity and excludes educational goals that aren’t directly performative. The result is a culture in which teachers and schools are considered to be failing in their duty if their students aren’t assessed against standardised measures, and if students’ results should indicate failure then this reflects individually on the student and teacher, as well as broadly on the school. However, the culture of performativity brought about by conservative modernisation, and the very data that are generated by this educational assemblage, does not indicate that it is succeeding in its goals; over the past 5 years in the United States and Australia students’ results have changed very little if at all, and have gone backwards in some cases (National Centre for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015; Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2015). In response, conservative modernisers argue there is a need

for greater standardisation and more rigorous control and assessment, a kind of ideological purism that in this case is tantamount to intellectual fraud.

Thus, the need for student voice work may never have been greater. If indeed student voice does offer an escape from performative culture and a challenge to existing structures of domination then, as Chua (2009) suggests, non-performative goals such as those involved in the authentic and democratic participation of students can not only help students to empower themselves, but also help to recover some of teachers' own vocational and professional beliefs and values.

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