

Student leadership, participation and democracy

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Abstract

This article analyses modes of participation which enable schools to develop as democratic communities of learning and leadership. It mines a rich vein of work sustained at Cambridge over many years. Contributors to this work have included Jean Rudduck, Michael Fielding, Donald McIntyre, John MacBeath and Madeleine Arnot. The modes of participation considered include student voice or consultation, students as researchers, participative pedagogy and student leadership. These resonate with the values of the Leadership for Learning (LfL) endeavour (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009) in which shared leadership is a cornerstone. This article explores the relationship between the key concepts of learning, participation and democracy. It draws its analysis from a series of key projects initiated under the umbrella of LfL in Cambridge in recent years, including the 'Influence and Participation of Young People in their Learning' project (MacBeath et al., 2008), the 'Evaluation of the Learning to Lead Initiative' project (Frost & MacBeath, 2010) and the 'Student Leadership for School Improvement' project (Roberts & Nash, 2010). All of these projects have enabled students at a variety of ages to exercise leadership and become full partners in the enterprise of learning. The analysis illuminates the links between the agency of learners, the development of their capacity for leadership and the growth of holistic democracy (Woods & Woods, 2011).

Introduction

Participation as a concept is broadly appealing. It is widely accepted that, although schooling is obligatory, it is desirable that all concerned, whether teachers or students, are able to participate in the process rather than be subject to it. The term ‘participation’ implies voluntary involvement or engagement and this is the big challenge for schools and teachers. How do we reconcile the tension between the reality of compulsory schooling and the necessity of volition for learning to actually occur (Corno, 2000)? The law can take the horse to water but it cannot make it drink. In this article we seek to address this question by examining various strategies for developing more participative approaches, moving towards a focus on student leadership and its role in building more democratic ways of life.

We begin by considering the rationale for participation. There are various instrumental arguments that start with the one that some secondary school teachers tend to advance to their reluctant scholars: that they will only get a good job if they pass their exams. This does not really ask young people to commit themselves to learning as such; it merely demands compliance with the process of preparation for tests. Beyond that is a more sophisticated rationale which focuses on school improvement. It might be suggested that schools will be more effective if we cultivate in our students an enhanced sense of belonging. This sense of belonging or attachment is essential to engagement which was highlighted by an analysis of the 2000 PISA data as correlating with educational success (Willms, 2000). Here participation is referred to alongside the term ‘belonging’ as being key dimensions of engagement (Willms, 2000). The report rightly highlights the importance of participation but unfortunately it is taken for granted that the student needs to fit the system. The report defines engagement as:

... the extent to which students identify with and value schooling

outcomes, and participate in academic and non-academic school activities. Its definition usually comprises a psychological component pertaining to students' sense of belonging at school and acceptance of school values, and a behavioural component pertaining to participation in school activities (Willms, 2000, p. 8).

The conception of participation here is inadequate in that it neglects the role of choice. A strong sense of belonging and participation leads to improvements in the quality of relationships and increased commitment to the goals of the school. Put simply, participation combats disaffection.

An even more instrumentalist rationale is that participation is a matter of human rights which may well have legal consequences if students or their families perceive that such rights have been infringed. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) set the benchmark and subsequent statements, such as the UK government's about the students' right to be consulted about matters that affect their learning (DCSF, 2008), continue to reinforce this point.

The instrumentalist rationales outlined above are perfectly valid of course, but they do not provide a firm enough foundation for the commitment to the development of a participative approach to education. The development of professional practice requires a more fundamental, pedagogical rationale that rests on the relationship between the concepts of learning, participation and democracy. Each of these is now explored.

Unpacking the concept of learning

A more fundamental rationale for student participation has to start with the question of what we mean by the term 'learning'. In the public discourse about education it is all too easy to conflate learning and achievement. It is profoundly regrettable that the pursuit of our understanding about the nature of learning meets the obstacle of high-stakes testing which leads us down a blind alley where we mistake the superficial

rehearsal of second-hand, off-the peg knowledge which helps our students to pass exams for actual learning. What then might actual learning be like? Space does not allow for more than a cursory discussion, but we want to argue for the importance of what Entwistle (2000) and others have called 'deep learning'. This implies the development of understanding and personal meaning which have a transformative effect on learners. Deep learning is empowering because it leads not only to enhanced capability in life but also to greater self-awareness, critical thinking and autonomy. This view of learning is supported by the recent review of primary education in England (Alexander, 2009) and by the outcomes of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP, 2007) in England.

Surface learning can be understood in behaviourist terms where students are expected to develop the performance that may be taken as a valid indicator of learning but without true learning necessarily having taken place. Deep learning on the other hand rests on the development of understanding (Egan, 1997). This is not to suggest that learning is not about performance; rather it is a matter of authenticity as illustrated by the following:

To engage students in critical thinking and production, tasks should represent real performances in the field of study (not bite-sized pieces of work that are several steps removed from actual performance): for example, students can design, conduct and analyse an experiment rather than just list the steps in the scientific method (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 108).

Surface learning is an inevitable part of playing the game of school where the goal is to achieve grades good enough to lead to the next hurdle, but deep learning is linked to self-actualisation or becoming a person. This can be seen in the Aristotelian sense as a matter of developing the virtues, values and capacity for reason that enable us to live the 'good life' and to take our places in the public sphere (MacIntyre, 1981). Here, the quest for human identity is a life-long endeavour which is reflected in the

current focus in many educational spheres on what has been termed learning to learn (James et al., 2007), meta-learning (Watkins, 2005) or the development of learning capacity. These terms imply much more than study skills or enquiry skills; rather they embrace the development of learning dispositions such as ‘resilience’ and the ability to make choices about learning strategies and goals.

If learning is about becoming and developing the capacity for learning as a continuous life-long process, it follows that learning has to be seen as an activity and in particular a social activity. Central to a social theory of learning is the concept of participation (Wenger, 1998).

Unpacking participation

According to Etienne Wenger, “participation refers to a process of taking part and also to the relations with others that reflect this process. It suggests both action and connection” (Wenger, 1998, p. 55). Wenger and Lave’s book ‘Communities of Practice’ explores in detail a social theory of learning which builds on the idea of ‘situated learning’ in which participation is characterised by negotiated meaning and person-centred practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This view draws on Bourdieu’s theory of social practice and focuses on the concept of community which does not imply mere ‘co-presence’ in a defined group; rather, participation is about activity systems in which there are shared understandings, concerns and meanings. This contrasts sharply with the PISA-influenced view of participation outlined earlier which can be seen to be more a matter of one-sided adaptation on the part of the students.

Participation as a feature of life in schools might be said to be determined by the extent to which leadership is distributed. For some, distributed leadership is simply a matter of delegating responsibilities through an organisational structure but in the main the literature takes a broader view which recognises the importance of collaborative and

interactive behaviour (Gronn, 2000, 2002; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004;). However, research tends to neglect the role of students in this. The problem is that leadership is most commonly viewed through the lens of the traditional organisational science which concentrates on designated roles through which authority is assigned. This automatically shuts out most teachers and almost all students.

A related and perhaps more helpful concept is that of ‘leadership density’ (Sergiovanni, 1992, 2001) which refers to the extent to which members of a learning community take responsibility for quality and effectiveness. Sergiovanni argues that a successful school is one in which the maximum degree of leadership is exercised by the maximum number of people including teachers, students, parents, support staff and so on (Sergiovanni, 1992). High leadership density results in high social capital and a strong sense of belonging.

The concept of community is clearly of crucial importance here. It is a term, frequently used in educational discourse in recent years, which is easy on the ear, but we need to be clear about the distinction between community and organisation which hinges on the relative importance of people; the personal growth and wellbeing of community members is the predominant concern in one case and, in the other case, it is the effectiveness of the organisation (Fielding, 2001a).

If the aim is to create a sense of community within which all members are able to learn, then what is needed is a set of strategies that foster, promote and facilitate participation. This has been expressed succinctly by Chris Watkins: ‘In classrooms where a sense of community is built, students are crew, not passengers’ (Watkins, 2005, p. 47). Watkins applies the metaphor to classrooms, but it might equally tell us something about that larger vehicle – the school. Arguably, what is really needed is a genuine sharing of responsibility and ownership in which all members have the right to act strategically to shape the school and what goes on within it.

Unpacking the concept of democracy

The word ‘democracy’ immediately conjures up the systems of voting, representation and public debate that enable politicians to make decisions on our behalf. It is often assumed that education’s part in this is to provide young people with courses on citizenship. In the UK, the Crick Report (1998) put citizenship education on the map and has led to the implementation of programmes in school. The report also made recommendations about ‘active citizenship’ as well as ‘formal preparation for citizenship’, but taught programmes have emerged as dominant. However, for society to be truly democratic, with all that implies about inclusivity, we need to cultivate particular ways of living and the institutional cultures which shape our lives. For Philip Woods, democracy within an organization is about:

sharing power and facilitating dialogue as part of the culture; enabling people to make decisions, work flexibly and collaboratively, and initiate change; giving people the entitlement to open and transparent information; and having systems and spaces through which people can influence, and own, the vision and strategies of the organisation (Woods, 2011).

Here the concept of ‘holistic democracy’ (Woods & Woods, 2011) attends to the question of the cultures we inhabit which may support or inhibit voice, open dialogue and critical thinking. The latter has always played a central role in the democratic way of life and, although we could trace this back to Socrates, the foundation of our current understanding of critical thinking and its role in civic society comes from the work of the American philosopher and educationalist, John Dewey.

An undesirable society.... is one which internally and externally sets us barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience. A society which makes provision for participation ... of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder (Dewey, 1916/2011, p. 56).

The values of critical thinking – such as respect for evidence, tolerance of multi-perspectives, reasoned argument and so on – are clearly what underpins democratic society and can be cultivated both through the formal curriculum and through the way we experience schooling (Louis, 2004). We cannot take for granted the capability to engage in dialogue, take a critical stance or express voice. Arguably these require induction, scaffolding and positive intervention in order for them to flourish, especially for young people.

Agency – the linking concept

A concept that both underpins and connects the key concepts of learning, participation and democracy discussed above is the fundamentally human capacity for agency. It is the nature of human beings to initiate action in an intentional and self-aware sense. It is uniquely human, not only to exercise choice and control over our actions, but also to create narratives through which we evaluate and regulate our actions and responses to our experience of the environment. Such an account is well supported by social theory (e.g., Giddens, 1984), from the psychological perspective of writers such as Bandura (1982) and by well-established educational writers such as Bruner (1996). He argues that agency is a fundamental aspect of self-hood and that human kind is distinguished not simply by the capacity to initiate and sustain activity of our own volition, but most crucially by the capacity to construct ‘a record of agentive encounters with the world’ (Bruner, 1996, p. 36). This capacity to create narratives necessarily involves moral choice about our actions and a sense of responsibility for them. Our actions require ‘skill and know-how’ and consequently the evaluation of our actions has a major impact on self-esteem.

Leadership for learning

A concern with the conditions that promote and support human agency in educational systems has been at the centre of the work of the Leadership for Learning (LfL) group at Cambridge since it was founded in 2000. LfL's aims have included those which concern the promotion and support of student participation through collaboration with other organisations in order to build professional knowledge, through research and accounts of innovative practice, and the development of an international network of practitioners and students. The relationship between the values declared at the outset was explored through the Carpe Vitam LfL research project (MacBeath et al., 2006; MacBeath & Dempster, 2009). In the conceptual framework that emerged from this project, the concept of agency was the link between leadership and learning of the kind that we might expect to find in a learning community.

The LfL initiative built on previous work at Cambridge which focused variously on student consultation (MacBeath et al., 2003; Rudduck et al., 1996) and students as researchers (Fielding, 2001b; Fielding & Bragg, 2003). Parallel to this in the 1990s was ground breaking work on leadership and school improvement (e.g. Hopkins et al., 1996). However, in LfL we adopted the view that it is unhelpful to treat learning and leadership as at best semi-detached discourses and at worst, quite separate fields of endeavour. Our initial standpoint was that leadership and learning are two sides of the same coin. This is expressed well by Mitchell and Sackney (2000) in their seminal book, 'Profound School Improvement'.

..in a learning community, individuals feel a deep sense of empowerment and autonomy and a deep personal commitment to the work of the school. This implies that people in the school form not just a community of learners but also a community of leaders (p. 93).

Arguably, the development towards becoming a learning community hinges on the extent to which participation can be cultivated. Literature on student participation

has often proposed the image of a ladder as a tool for reviewing the quality and extent of participation. This metaphor occurs in various forms, for example in Shier (2001), Hart (1992 & 1997) and Schultz Jorgensen (2004). Although varying in actual descriptors, such ladders all propose a cumulative, and thus potentially hierarchical, view of student participation. We wish to argue that student participation which supports effective learning cannot be categorised by such a neat and vertical typology. Rather, it may be more helpful to imagine a gradual and often opportunistic movement along a horizontal continuum which has at one end, the school as an alienating organisation and at the other, the school as a democratic learning community. In the exploration below the crucial role of student leadership becomes more evident.

In the rest of this paper we explore a number of modes of participation which can enable a school to move along this continuum. The discussion of these modes is organised under the following headings: ‘Student consultation/voice’, ‘Student governance/representation’, ‘Students’ roles of responsibility’, ‘Students as researchers’, ‘Participative pedagogy’ and ‘Student leadership’. In doing this we draw largely, but not exclusively, upon three key projects initiated under the umbrella of LfL in Cambridge. The first of these projects is the *Influence and Participation of Young People in their Learning (IPiL)* project (MacBeath et al., 2008) commissioned by the General Teaching Council for England in 2007 and carried out by the LfL team at the University of Cambridge. The project sought to reveal the variety of practices schools adopt to enable young people to participate in and influence the conditions of their own learning, particularly in relation to assessment, behaviour for learning and the curriculum. The second project is the evaluation of the *Learning to Lead* initiative which began in The Blue School in Wells, Somerset, as a way of enhancing student engagement, arising from and extending the work of the school council with a view to engaging a wider spectrum of students in school improvement. The evaluation was

carried out by the LfL team in 2010 (Frost & MacBeath, 2010; Frost & Stenton, 2010). The *Student Leadership for School Improvement* project (SLSI) (Roberts & Nash, forthcoming), led by two LfL Associates, focuses on providing teachers and school leaders with the skills, structure and resources to develop student leadership in their schools. We draw upon evidence from these and other related projects to review both the potential contribution of various modes of student participation to a participative and democratic learning culture and the possible limitations to achieving this potential.

Student consultation/voice

Student voice has become an accepted term in schools. It is sometimes used to mean the provision of opportunities for students to express their views, with the expectation that someone will listen although not necessarily act, an activity referred to as ‘pupil consultation’ by some writers (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). For some, the term ‘student voice’ embraces a wider spectrum of activity including those discussed below. The decades since the UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) have seen its pronouncement of the fundamental rights of children to be consulted echoed in government advice and policy in the UK (DfES, 2003, 2004; DES, 2005; DCSF, 2008). However, recent studies of practice in schools indicate that consultation often involves only a small number of students, with their unconsulted peers remaining outside of the circle of participation (MacBeath et al., 2008). The use of seemingly democratic student voice initiatives as vehicles to secure compliance is similarly noted (Fielding, 2001b; Roberts & Nash, 2009; Roberts & Nash, forthcoming).

An acknowledgement of these potential limitations appears to be key to successful student voice initiatives. For example, in the Learning to Lead initiative, the use of an initial whole-school survey of students’ views ensures that all students have their views heard and taken account of in a plan for student involvement in school

improvement. Learning to Lead pursues inclusion through a much wider range of strategies however. Inclusion is set as a formal goal, with students and staff overtly pursuing this aim through the use of tools to facilitate maximum contribution. The challenge of communication is similarly acknowledged and addressed, with the effective use of open communication systems to maximise involvement. Agendas, minutes and newsletters are shared widely using graphics and other presentational devices as well as more contemporary media such as podcasts and blogs. In this project it is assumed that each member of the school community will at the very least be informed, thus opening up the possibility of more active participation. An example of such democracy in action is the Forum meeting. Here, representatives of project teams and project facilitators meet to share updates and views. In this extract based on the observation of a Forum meeting (see Figure 1) it is evident that the reports from project teams not only provide the opportunity to raise issues but also to enter into the informed debate which is at the centre of the democratic approach.

FIGURE 1: A VIGNETTE FROM THE LEARNING TO LEAD PROJECT

Pursuing inclusion through democratic action

The Buddying Team led by their lower sixth form facilitator made a presentation about their work. They talked about what had worked well, what could be improved and what could be learned for the future. The PowerPoint slides contained a range of grounded observations, responses and ideas for action. There was some criticism of teachers' behaviour in general. They identified desirable changes such as bringing in vertical tutor groups. They spoke of carrying out research in other schools. Feedback was sought from Forum members who expressed views and asked questions such as those below:

*How would we be taught as we'd be at different levels?
It's a big plan. I think there should be consultation with the whole school. I think everyone should be involved.
Why do we need houses back?
Aren't vertical tutor groups daunting for Year 7s?*

The team responded well to the questions from the floor. The Buddying Team wanted to consult students but were not sure that students would complete online surveys. They discussed these dilemmas openly in the forum.

(from Frost & MacBeath, 2010, p. 20)

This extract illustrates well not only how the students can express their views but how this expression is linked to a wider discussion and follow-up action. In interpreting the significance of this vignette, the word ‘dialogue’ is perhaps more useful than ‘voice’. Dialogue is used by teachers across all three projects to refer to a process which is more than a one-off event in which a single person speaks and another listens. In the context of their classrooms, it refers instead to a way of being, an ethos in which everyone’s voice is equally valuable and heard. This dialogic climate is captured in Robin Alexander’s notion of the dialogic classroom and the dialogic school (Alexander, 2008), Senge’s ‘learning school’ (Senge et al., 2000) and McGilchrist, Myers and Reed’s (2004) ‘intelligent school’. This ideal scenario is acknowledged by project participants as difficult to attain yet key to a meaningful exchange of views in which young people do not simply provide superficial comments on learning in response to an adult agenda but begin to create and articulate their own understanding through pedagogical partnership. This is illustrated by these comments from a teacher in the SLSI project.

We have started to break down the barrier between staff and students and initiated conversations between them about learning and teaching that just didn’t happen before.... The effect on school practice has been slower than I anticipated. I realise now that my expectations were ambitious and that something as big as this will take time to really work (Lead Teacher, School C) (Roberts & Nash, 2009, pp. 184-185)

The IPiL project similarly recognised the need to construct spaces in which students were not only offered the opportunity to enter into a meaningful dialogue with

others but were also taught the protocols of such engagement. Regular teacher/student conferences gave participants the opportunity to work together to reflect on how students could be more participative and influential in the learning enterprise. Students valued the opportunity to enter into a dialogue with their teachers outside of the normal constraints of in-school relationships. They were able to *speak out without being afraid* (MacBeath et al., 2008, p. 18) and to *really concentrate on deep reflection on other people's learning* (p. 19).

Student governance and representation

Schools Councils are one the most longstanding forums in the UK for students to express their views, sometimes including the capacity for actual decision-making. Councils are normally representative of different years or age groups and councillors may be elected by student vote or appointed by staff. Senior Leaders themselves acknowledge the potential imbalance of voices heard in schools.

Although we have a well-developed Student Parliament, the nature of students who volunteer tend to be confident and articulate. (Headteacher, School B)
(Roberts & Nash, 2009, p. 177)

Whilst the developing breadth of roles within such systems allows for more inclusive recruitment and selection procedures, research indicates that some formal systems of representation continue be limited in terms of real participation, perhaps due in part to a lack of clarity over their purpose and scope (Whitty & Wisby, 2007). In the Learning to Lead project, the original School Council underwent a radical transformation, giving birth to student project teams. The teams allowed a large number of students to extend their participation, becoming activists rather than simply respondents and exercising leadership in tackling problems and concerns in practical and transformative ways (Frost & MacBeath, 2010). This model appears to remain the exception rather than the

rule however and raises the question of how we might develop democratic schools in which students are truly agential. This is not to suggest that all schools can become democratic in the purest sense. Students' agency operates within necessary social structures (Roche, 1999, cited in Flutter & Rudduck, 2004), which we found reflected in the interviews with students in the SLSI project, as the following comments demonstrate.

I am hoping to present this to the senior staff and it will be them who make the decision whether it will go ahead. (Student B, School C)

Teachers will think about our research and probably put it into action because they will want to know what will help students to learn better. (Student C, School B) (Roberts & Nash, 2009, p. 181)

Students need support to avoid simply accepting that decision-making responsibility rests with adults which removes from them any responsibility to take action, thus limiting their potential to develop their leadership capacity. Encouraging all members of the school community to view leadership as a relational process of influence rather than as hierarchical positioning (McGregor, 2007) would enable the adoption of a more democratic viewpoint which recognises and supports students' leadership.

Students' roles of responsibility

There is a well-established tradition of assigning special roles of responsibility to students. Prefects and school monitors have given responsibility to a minority of the more able students. Such responsibilities can be enriching for those concerned. In the

projects discussed in this article a much wider range of positions is evident; students undertook many roles including playground mentors, stewards at parents' evenings, school receptionists. In some UK schools, students act as Subject Representatives. In this role they might lead lunchtime activities or support other students who have difficulties with the subject. Other schools have taken up the opportunity for leadership through programmes such as 'Sports Leaders', a programme which helps students to learn to lead. In others, students act as reading buddies, initiate clubs, support younger students, help with displays for learning or assist with school productions (Bourne, 2007). The IPiL research found many examples of students taking on roles traditionally played by teachers, for example, taking part in recruitment and selection procedures. Although playing a consultative rather than decision-making role, students nonetheless were seen by staff to bring a fresh insight into complex and important processes.

Students as researchers

Enabling students to carry out research is a powerful way to support the development of leadership potential, particularly if the research focus is learning and the conditions that support learning. Such research embodies the Aristotelian values of tolerance and flexibility, developed through critical thinking, reasoning and evidence-based argument. Thus, in a model of student research which focuses on school improvement, students' fundamental purpose is the interpretation and use of data to bring about change (Demetriou & Rudduck, 2004; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002). Thomson and Gunter's (2007) description of such student activity as 'standpoint research' adds to our understanding of the potential here for agential action. In the research evidenced in the three projects drawn upon in this article, students sought to problematise the experience of schooling, taking on the role of 'expert witnesses' (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004) and

displaying a ‘professionalism’ which had the potential to lead to action (Watts & Youens, 2007).

IPiL project students were offered the opportunity to join a group to induct them into research techniques. They were then invited to develop and undertake an inquiry into their own area of interest, presenting the outcome to peers and staff. Teachers were surprised by the lack of direction needed by students, who seemed to be able to rely on their natural curiosity and investigative instinct to frame their inquiry project. The SLSI project supported students in developing this natural inquiry impulse by offering the metaphor of the research process as a journey of seven steps, expressed as a series of questions.

FIGURE 2: THE 7 STEP JOURNEY

- Step 1: What do I want to make a difference to?
- Step 2: What information do I need to find out?
- Step 3: How will I find this out?
- Step 4: How will I organise what I find out?
- Step 5: How will I make sense of what I’ve learned?
- Step 6: How will I tell other people about what I’ve learned?
- Step 7: How can I continue to make a difference to my school?

(from Roberts & Nash, 2009)

Students used their answers to these questions to design and undertake a research project based on their own agenda (Roberts & Nash, 2009). This democratic approach to the choice of focus area challenges some students’ experience of other student voice initiatives, for example, school councils (Hadfield & Hawe, 2001; Raymond, 2001) where what is discussed often remains controlled by adults. However, with freedom comes responsibility. Many student researchers find it challenging to accept their role in

putting their recommendations into action, constructing themselves as consultants or advisors rather than actors (Mitra, 2001). This student in the SLSI project evidences this tendency.

The responsibility for getting it known is the person who came up with the idea.

The responsibility of getting it to the next level ... after a while I can't do anything more. (Student E, School C) (Roberts & Nash, 2009, p. 181)

Emphasising the need for student activity post-research in the SLSI project met with only partial success (Roberts & Nash, 2009). The Learning to Lead project evidenced more success in this area.

We all came together to build the chicken coop. It was a really good thing for team building and everyone had fun!!!

We all came together to clean the pond and find what wildlife there was and we found 29 newts and two different types, which means the pond is healthy. (Frost & MacBeath, 2010, p. 22)

This difference could be attributed to the more practical nature of some of the agendas adopted by Learning to Lead project students. In terms of building pedagogic cultures, all three projects recognised the ambitious and long-term nature of the attempt to build sound pedagogic cultures in which teachers and students collaborate in the development of the learning enterprise.

Participative pedagogy

An independent school in the UK – Summerhill School – became famous in the 1960s for its radical approach to student choice (Neil, 1961). It was shocking to many observers that students could decide whether or not they attended lessons and many chose not to. However, focusing on the question of the freedom to opt out diverts attention away from the nature of what goes on within the classroom and the extent to which that could be described as participatory. This is particularly critical when we are largely considering the context where school attendance is compulsory which is usually interpreted as meaning that going to lessons is not optional.

Clearly classroom practice can be authoritarian, teacher-centred and didactic with the traditional balance of power being towards the teacher. Alternatively, classrooms can be seen as temporary communities where the identities, perspectives, needs and aspirations of the students are routinely given expression and taken into account. The IPiL project highlighted the importance of opportunities for pupils to make real choices about the curriculum they are studying and the nature and direction of their learning. In one primary school teachers had involved their students in a process of curriculum design by inviting them to draw ‘mind maps’ and other visual representations of what they thought could be included in the theme for the following term (Edwards & Gilbert, 2010).

Primary schools generally appear to have greater power to create such participative climates, perhaps due to the pressure to concentrate on the more measurable quality and effectiveness indicators in secondary schools. However, there are examples of illuminative practice in schools across all phases. Some schools investigate students’ learning preferences as a vehicle for opening up a situated dialogue about learning (Johnson, 2006). In others, students are drawn into a collaborative lesson planning process, making suggestions for areas of study and learning approaches

(MacBeath et al., 2008). Target setting features as the vehicle for pedagogic partnership in other settings, with pupils specifying the *must, could and should* in relation to a given learning objective or choosing the individual level of challenge they wish to work at. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's (QCA) invitation to customize the curriculum (QCA, 2008) may continue to encourage the further development of such innovative practice.

A development of student pedagogic choice is taking on roles traditionally viewed as the teacher's domain. The IPiL project revealed examples of pupils both instigating and being involved with reviews and self-evaluation exercises. Examples included curriculum review exercises, self-review exercises in collaboration with parents and peer mentoring projects. Students increasingly work in collaborative pedagogic partnerships with teachers to plan, lead and evaluate lessons or parts of lessons. A key feature of the SLSI project is the resources it provides to support teachers and students in developing working practices which cast students not as consumers but as partners in the enterprise of learning (Roberts & Nash, 2010), for example by working alongside teachers in developing new teaching materials.

Comparatively little research has been undertaken into students' contribution to the development of individual teachers' practice and whole-school learning and teaching policy (Pedder & McIntyre, 2006). Most studies focus on student decision making in areas such as homework, fundraising and the school canteen (Ekholm, 2004) rather than on exploring the contribution that students can make to the ongoing development of learning. At a secondary school which took part in the IPiL project, students were invited to join a team and be trained to carry out lesson observations. The process involved trust-building activities with the teachers, dialogue about the possible focus of attention, and agreement as to protocols for observation and feedback (MacBeath et al., 2008).

Teachers and school principals appreciated the potentially transformative nature of such pedagogic partnerships and their link to more fully developed forms of student leadership.

We have to use learners more successfully to help us to develop our understanding of learning and teaching. There's a recognition that we (students and teachers) need to work together on this. (Headteacher, School B) (Roberts & Nash, 2009, p. 185)

If schools are to move along the continuum towards becoming democratic communities in which the talents of all are both allowed to blossom and are drawn upon, then the importance of building learning cultures in which young people are seen as full partners in the learning enterprise is clear.

Student leadership

The term 'leadership' evokes a range of responses which stem from deeply ingrained assumptions and experiences. It is not uncommon to think of monarchs, generals and war time prime ministers when we hear the word. It is perhaps not surprising then that the term is rarely associated with anyone other than the school principal. The shortcomings of the 'heroic leadership paradigm' have been well documented (Yukl, 2010) but the practice of shared leadership remains a challenge.

The idea of student leadership is often associated with preparation for leadership in adult life, but here we are concerned with leadership in the here and now of school experience. In order to promote the idea of student leadership it is perhaps more productive to adopt a *leadership*-focused perspective rather than a *leader*-focused one. Raelin (2003) promotes the concept of 'leaderful practice' and 'leaderful communities'

although he did not have schools in mind when he wrote his influential book. Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile to apply some of his ideas to the world of schools.

A basic question concerns the nature of leadership practice and whether it can be applied to young people and students. Arguably, leadership is a human capacity which includes the following sorts of activities:

- influencing others
- inspiring others
- taking the initiative
- offering support/service
- holding others to account
- modelling learning behaviour
- valuing/encouraging helpful behaviour.

(Greenleaf, 1977; Spillane, 2006; Yukl, 2010;)

If leadership practice includes this type of activity and behaviours, it seems reasonable to assert that all members of an educational community including students might be able to make a contribution.

A number of examples of leadership activity are to be found in the three projects we have been discussing. A clear focus of the SLSI project was the development of students as lesson observers, an initiative which also featured in the IPiL project. A teacher handbook (Roberts & Nash, 2010) was produced to support teachers and students in working in partnership to develop both the mutual understanding and practical skills which would allow student observation of lessons to become a supportive and developmental process for student and teacher. Resources help students to reflect on the nature of learning, the stages of a successful lesson and the principles and protocols of lesson observation and feedback. Students responded positively to sessions undertaken using these materials with comments including the following.

The training session taught me how to analyse lessons and I learned how to give feedback without being rude. (Roberts & Nash, forthcoming)

Despite an initial positive response from teachers, students found it hard to secure invitations to observe lessons. Further work is clearly needed on how the fear that participative practices might be yet another surveillance mechanism can be ameliorated. Some teachers however see the potential for students not only to comment on lessons but also to lead them.

Student leadership is at the core of the Learning to Lead programme which involves a school-wide survey and discussion to identify priorities for action (Frost & Stenton, 2010). Students are then invited to join project teams focusing on those priorities. These typically include teams such as ‘The recycling team’ or ‘Improving the school playgrounds team’ as well as ones dedicated to caring for chickens and growing food in the school grounds. Each team is provided with induction and support to enable them to become self-leading teams able to take action to transform their schools and communities. These teams all report back to the School Forum which makes decisions about how best to support the process. The School Forum, facilitated by students themselves, appoints representatives to join a committee which includes senior leadership team members to ensure co-operation. This is a rare example of a practice which is explicitly and directly focused on enabling students to exercise leadership. The evidence set out in the evaluation report points to radical shifts in student dispositions, marked improvement in the quality of relationships and the development of participative school cultures which enable young people to flourish and achieve (Frost & MacBeath, 2010).

The evaluation had a great deal to say about the ways in which exercising

leadership supports students' development, but critically for our present purposes, it illuminated the way it can build democratic values and skills. This student reflected on how he had come to see himself as part of a community.

It's made a difference because you ain't just affecting yourself anymore, you're affecting everyone else, like you're getting involved with others to make a difference and like you ain't just an individual anymore, but you recognise you're part of everything else. (Student, School M)

This sense of building a community was seen by some students as being a duty to future generations of students, as these comments illustrate:

We have the feeling that we will pass it on. We start things up for others to carry on.
(Student, School I)

We're changing stuff and doing this for other generations who come to this school as well. This will stay. It won't finish when we leave. (Student, School M) (Frost & MacBeath, 2010)

Another distinct way in which students are able to exercise leadership is through leading the learning of others. Figure 3 is just one example.

FIGURE 3: STUDENTS LEADING LESSONS - AN ILLUSTRATIVE

VIGNETTE

I asked a group of thirty GCSE Chemistry students to plan, prepare and deliver their own lessons on a new topic over the course of a term. Each week, a group of four students was selected and provided with the learning objectives for next week's lesson, which would last one hour and forty minutes. I met up with each group a couple of days before the lesson would take place to discuss their lesson plan and assist them in gathering any resources or equipment they had decided to use. When the students first began teaching each other, members of the class initially found it hard to adjust to being taught by their peers. The quality of the listening was poor and the 'teachers' found it hard to be heard. Despite this I did not intervene; it was essential that the students learnt for themselves that they had to listen in order to make progress. As a result, the class quickly began to self-regulate their own behaviour, and effective learning began to take place. Feedback from students and observers suggested a shift in attitudes and culture towards a more collaborative, listening classroom environment with independent learning opportunities, meta-cognitive processes and integrated assessment for learning.

(from Murphy, forthcoming)

This sort of activity relies on teachers taking the initiative but it is a growing trend in the school in which Tom Murphy teaches and in other schools in the network to which he belongs.

Conclusion

We made the point earlier that participation is not a matter of simply letting go the reins of power and allowing students to express their viewpoints and become influential. Participation is something we all have to learn to do. The question is: how do we learn to participate? We argue here that this cannot rest on a taught programme which tells students how they might participate at some point in the future when they achieve their majority; rather they need to experience opportunities to participate as they progress

through their schooling. They also need structured induction and support to enable the development of the necessary skills and the confidence. It is incumbent on schools therefore to review professional practice and to take opportunities and launch initiatives aimed at steering the school towards that ideal of being ‘not only a community of learners but also a community of leaders’ as Mitchell & Sackney (2000, p. 93) put it.

The report of the IPiL project put forward a set of principles for practice which had been hammered out through a research-based discursive process involving teachers, students and researchers. These principles were offered as a tool for review (see Figure 4 below) and have since been used by many school principals and their colleagues to take stock of practice in their schools and identify next steps.

FIGURE 4: PRINCIPLES FOR PRACTICE TO CULTIVATE PARTICIPATION

Pupil participation in their own learning is enhanced when:

1. School structures are designed to encourage and support participation
2. Pupil participation and influence is embodied in the culture
3. The relationship between teachers and pupils is seen as a partnership for learning
4. The experience and expertise of pupils are drawn upon as resources for learning and school improvement
5. Teaching is responsive to the needs and interests of pupils and creates space for a learning dialogue to occur
6. Pupils are able to exercise choice and agency in all aspects of their learning
7. Pupils have opportunities to participate in school-wide decision-making
8. Everyone, including pupils, is encouraged to exercise leadership as appropriate to task and context with opportunities for leadership to be a shared activity
9. Everyone, including pupils, is encouraged to engage in systematic inquiry and reflection focusing on the nature of learning and the experience of schooling
10. Pupils are key players in school self-evaluation, an ongoing process embedded at classroom, school and community levels

(from MacBeath et al., 2008)

The use of such tools for review as a means of school development and professional learning represent in themselves democratic ways of being. Democracy cannot be delivered as if some kind of service to students; rather, it has to be a characteristic of a learning community. This implies that teachers need to be enabled to engage in dialogue about values and purposes through which they may be encouraged to consider how best to cultivate human agency for all members of that community. This implies a focus on student leadership as part of a general move towards schools as the kinds of communities referred to above (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000).

We echo the IPiL project report when we say that change and development require courage and sensitivity to open up the possibility of sharing power and responsibility.

It requires a developmental mindset in which senior leaders enable their colleagues to engage in systematic review of practice. It is a form of self-evaluation which is ongoing and embedded, not a ritual data collection or prelude to an Ofsted visit. It is one that draws pupils themselves into the process of evaluation, planning and development (MacBeath et al., 2008, p. 50).

We hope it is not too grandiose to say that the future of democracy across the world may well depend on the extent to which schools can become the sort of communities in which the skills, values and dispositions necessary for the maintenance of democratic civil society are cultivated through the pedagogy that is manifest in classrooms but also through the rich variety of modes of participation in which student leadership is prominent.

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