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Student voice and children's rights: Participation, empowerment and "protagonismo"

Harry Shier

Introduction

All children have a right to speak out and be heard on *all matters* affecting their education. Adults have a duty not just to listen, but to give due weight to the views expressed. As participation is a human right, it does not have to be justified by reference to proven benefits. However, there is a growing body of research evidence to show that it indeed brings many and varied benefits to children and schools.

This entry will therefore look more closely at the relationship between student voice and children's rights, focusing on the implications for adults, both as duty-bearers of these rights, and as the dominant wielders of power in education systems (Robinson, 2011). This is important because, despite the many references to children's rights in the "student voice" literature, in practice, student voice initiatives can easily become subverted, wittingly and unwittingly, by a focus on adults' concerns.

This entry first frames student voice as a human right protected under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and articulates the rights that are particularly relevant to children exercising their voice in the course of their schooling. Next, some of the most useful conceptual tools available to help understand and implement children's participation are noted. The entry then considers the concept of "empowerment", which, though widely seen as a desirable goal linked to participation, is tricky to define, and trickier to deliver. Nevertheless, participation/student voice processes can help empowerment grow within students, leading in turn to expressions of *protagonismo*; autonomous, student-led mobilisation, which may be organised with or without adult support and approval. The entry therefore concludes with an exploration of "*protagonismo*" and how it can disturb the well-established power relationships between children and adults that underpin schools and schooling; a disturbance which can be either applauded or condemned, depending on the perspective it is viewed from.

Participation as the child's right

For a rights-based perspective on student voice, the first point of reference must be UNCRC; an international treaty binding on all the world's governments with the exception of the United States of America (being the only UN member state not to have ratified the Convention). However, the word "voice" is not mentioned once in the text of the Convention (nor is the word "student"), so to understand the connection it is necessary to examine the group of Articles that have come to be known as "participation rights". The most relevant of these are:

- Article 12: The child's right to freely express views on all matters that affect him or her, and to have these views given due weight when decisions are made;
- Article 13: Freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, through any media of the child's choice;
- Article 14: Freedom of thought, conscience and religion;

- Article 15: Freedom of association and peaceful assembly. In the context of schools and schooling, this underpins students' right to self-organise, form students' unions etc. That is, the right to assembly is not restricted to officially-sanctioned Student Councils and similar spaces regulated and supervised by adults in authority.

When discussing "participation rights" it is important to take on board this bundle of rights. However, Article 12 is of paramount importance as it has been identified by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as one of the "General Principles" of the Convention. Article 12 states:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Several elements here are significant for educators. First, the right to speak out and be heard is guaranteed to every child who is "capable of forming his or her own views". The criterion is the capacity to *form a view*. There is no requirement for the view to be correct or worthy, nor for the child to be able to communicate a view in any specific or approved way. Ironically, "the right to be heard" is guaranteed to children who do not speak.

Furthermore, the exercise of this right applies to "all matters affecting the child". In relation to schooling, matters that affect the child profoundly include the content of the curriculum and the quality of the teaching. And yet these are matters rarely if ever discussed in the official participation spaces in schools. This raises questions about who is setting the agenda, on what terms and in whose interests.

Those who are charged with making decisions about children's education bear the duty to "give due weight" to the views expressed by children (Lundy, 2007). However, there is no obligation on adults to accede to children's demands. When school students make proposals, provided their views are heard and given fair consideration, in the final reckoning their proposals may legitimately be rejected. When this happens, however, it is regarded as good practice to go back to the students in question with a reasoned explanation, and a willingness to search for alternative solutions to the underlying problem.

The exact meaning of "due weight" in Article 12 has been widely discussed, and the concept of the "evolving capacities of the child" has been developed to help address this issue (Lansdown 2005). Very young children are generally in need of greater protection and guidance from adults, so that often (though not always) other factors outweigh the children's preferences. Adolescents, on the other hand, particularly those approaching adulthood, can make a much wider range of decisions for themselves, exercising responsibility individually and collectively, so adults are obliged to give greater weight to their views when making decisions that affect them. Note that biological age is not the only factor in the equation; 'maturity' is also mentioned. Some young children can be very mature and responsible, while adults can sometimes be immature and irresponsible. These issues are central in determining the form and scope of student participation in schools

As with all international human rights treaties, the state is the principal duty-bearer in relation to the rights of the child. However, it is important to note that teachers, carrying out the function of education under the aegis of the state, are under these same obligations. Schools that do not meet these obligations are violating children's rights on a daily basis. Equally it is the right of all citizens, which includes students, parents and teachers themselves, to call the state to account where it is failing in its duties with respect to participation rights in schools.

Considering the dynamics of power here, in conventional education systems, teachers and other adult authority figures hold all the power; in Lukes' classic formulation, they have direct, indirect and ideological power over their students (Gaventa, 2003). Against this adult domination, the knowledge and defence of rights by students offers a potential for resistance; in the words of Katherine Federle (1994), "A right, in its fundamental sense, is power held by the powerless" (p. 345).

Recognising student voice as a *child's right* in this way, there is no need to further justify its practice and promotion. When one has the right to do something, one is not obliged to give any justification in order to be permitted to do it. However, as more research has been done on the effects and impacts of children's participation, benefits are now known to include: improving the quality of schools; improving academic outcomes; reducing anti-social behaviour such as bullying; enhancing social and political education; and increasing teacher satisfaction. However, the most significant benefit of participation in relation to the present discussion is its contribution to the empowerment of children and young people; enabling them to develop a role as agents of social change rather than subjects of social control.

Conceptual models that have helped adults become more effective in supporting and facilitating participation.

Since the promulgation of UNCRC, literally dozens of models have been proposed to help thinkers and practitioners understand and analyse the phenomenon of children's participation. Statistician George Box pointed out that "Essentially all models are wrong, but some of them are useful", which is a useful maxim to bear in mind when reviewing the multiplicity of models available. Many proposed participation models are purely theoretical, of interest mainly to academics. Some, however, have transcended the academic literature and proved their utility as tools for practitioners. Four of the most popular of these will be highlighted here, namely those associated with Hart, Shier, Lundy and Lansdown.

Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation

One of the earliest models, Roger Hart's (1992) "Ladder of children's participation", has proved uniquely influential in the field. An important legacy of Hart's work is his naming and shaming of the various forms of false participation that abound in this field. Hart identified three types which he called "manipulation", "decoration" and "tokenism"; all of which, in subtly different ways, serve to perpetuate and reinforce the inequitable power relations that participation practice is supposed to challenge. Though Hart exposed them in 1992, all three persist in the 21st Century, and vigilance is still needed to recognise and address them.

Shier's "Pathways to Participation"

Owing a significant debt to Hart, Harry Shier's (2001) model proposes five levels of participation:

1. Children are listened to;
2. Children are supported in expressing their views;
3. Children's views are taken into account;
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes;
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

Where this model is innovative, however, is in recognising how the adults involved – both individuals and organisations – have differing degrees of commitment to the process of child empowerment. The model therefore identifies three stages of commitment at each level: *openings*, *opportunities* and *obligations*. At each level, an *opening* occurs when a worker is ready to operate at that level, i.e. they make a personal commitment to work in a certain way. An *opportunity*, occurs when the worker or organisation is able to operate at this level in practice, which may require new resources, skills and knowledge, and development of new practice or approaches. Finally, an *obligation* is established when it becomes agreed policy that staff should operate at this level, and participation thus becomes built-in to the system. The model also makes it clear than an unequivocal commitment, not just to listen to children, but to give due weight to their views in

decision-making, is the minimum policy position required for an organisation, such as a school, to avoid violation of children's rights under the UN Convention.

The main criticism levelled at hierarchical models such as Hart's and Shier's is that they imply that higher levels are better so we must always strive to climb higher. In defence of the hierarchical models, Shier has suggested we consider how we use a ladder in real life: Sometimes we use it to climb to the top and move on, but more often it simply enables us to work at the correct height for the job in hand, which may be only half-way up.

Lundy's model of "Space, Voice, Audience and Influence"

Laura Lundy (2007) presented an explicit critique of practices in schools that are seen as expressions of "student voice" (or "pupil voice", which was a common term at the time), yet fall short of respecting and fulfilling students' participation rights.

Lundy's approach sidesteps the debate about hierarchies created by levels or rungs. Instead it proposes four distinct, but interrelated elements of student voice: *Space, Voice, Audience* and *Influence*, all of which have to be put in place to ensure children's right to participate is fully realised. Children need a safe and supported space in order to form and articulate the views that they wish to express. They need a voice, in the sense that there must be an appropriate mechanism for their views to be expressed. They need an audience; that is their message must be listened to, and in particular it must be listened to by those whose duty it is to do so. Finally the expression of views, once heard, must be duly acted upon.

Lansdown's three modes of participation

Where the watchword is simplicity, there is no clearer, simpler model for understanding children's participation than that proposed by Gerison Lansdown (2011), which conveniently reduces the myriad forms of children's participation to three essential "levels of engagement". These are: *Consultation*, occurring when adults ask children for their views and children are not involved beyond this; *Collaboration*, when adults and children work together, sharing roles and responsibilities; and *child-led*, referring to activities initiated, organised or run by children themselves, with or without some level of adult support. For completeness, it is helpful to add a fourth level; that of exclusion or "non-involvement".

An advantage of Lansdown's model is that it is simple enough to use in discussions with children themselves about their experiences of or aspirations for participation/student voice initiatives.

Empowerment

As mentioned above, empowerment has been discussed as one of the main benefits of children's participation in general and "student voice" in particular. The word "empowerment" is often found in discourses on child participation, but is seldom adequately defined in this context. A useful model for understanding and engendering empowerment is that developed by CESESMA in Nicaragua, where empowerment is defined as a process which requires the coming together of three elements: enabling conditions, capability, and belief in one's own agency (Shier, 2019). Therefore, to be considered "empowered" a boy or girl must be in conditions where they can have an influence, must have the knowledge and abilities required in order to have an influence and, above all, must feel themselves capable of having an influence.

An important implication of this view of empowerment is that adults cannot "empower" children. Building capacity and creating enabling conditions are not enough on their own, as any power thus given can also be taken away. Empowerment must therefore be achieved through a transformative process within the person. What adults can do, however, is draw on the model of conditions, capacities and attitude/self-belief to develop and facilitate the kinds of processes that will most likely lead young people towards such transformation.

“Protagonismo Infantil”

In Latin America, over decades, defenders of the rights of working children have built an alternative paradigm for child participation. This approach, which has become known as “*protagonismo infantil*”, affirms that working children can acquire the capacity to autonomously pursue and defend their own interests, both individually and collectively. Though this can be translated as “child protagonism” or “pro-active participation”, the English words lack the extensive cultural and philosophical underpinning that attaches to the Latin American concept (Taft, 2017).

Protagonismo occurs when children’s own “autonomous” organisations take a *leading* role in conceiving and carrying out actions to improve their present circumstances and future prospects. Rooted as it is in the history of movements of organised working children, *protagonismo* is not about individual children taking a lead or acting independently in defence of individual rights, but rather collective action by organised, self-directed groups. Whilst it is possible for children to carry out *protagonismo* independently without adult support, and indeed children participate in many kinds of activities without adult help or involvement (consider, for example, youth subcultures cohering around music, dance or sports), such activities often go unseen and unreported by adults and are thus invisible in the literature.

Where *protagonismo* is observed, more often than not there is a pivotal role for adults, which can be both positive and negative. On the one hand, adult supporters may be involved in facilitating, building capacity, mobilising and resourcing actions that children themselves organise and direct. On the other hand adults also have power to control access to spaces and resources, and can use this to manage and constrain children’s mobilisation and thus limit their autonomous actions.

The Latin American literature describes many examples of *protagonismo* in educational settings. Though such practices may be found in schools throughout the world, outside Latin America they are less likely to be recognised or labelled as *protagonismo*.

The practice of *protagonismo* by school students can be problematic. Sometimes adults in authority approve and praise it, recognising it as a positive expression of active citizenship by students, and reporting positive outcomes. On many occasions, however, for example when students organise marches, protests, sit-ins and other kinds of political actions, it is seen as cause for concern, a challenge to legitimate adult authority and disruption of established power relations. This perspective is often linked to claims about manipulation by “politically-motivated outsiders”, but the line between legitimate mobilisation and manipulation is never clear-cut (consider for example the mobilisation of UK school students to protest their country’s involvement in war in Iraq in 1992).

Though *protagonismo* thrives – recognised and unrecognised – in schools and education systems around the world, it must be acknowledged that the majority of practice that comes under the heading of “student voice” does not fit the idea of protagonismo. Participation spaces such as student councils are commonly set up by adults, students are invited into them and, once inside, their power to act is regulated and constrained (sometimes manipulated). Then again, more sophisticated contemporary analyses show how these adult-run structures can themselves be appropriated and subverted by students, mischievously asserting *protagonismo* by other means.

In discussing participation as a right, above, a conventional, Lukesian view of power as something held by adults and wielded to control children was alluded to, with rights available to the “powerless” as a form of resistance. To understand *protagonismo*, however, a different, Foucauldian type of power analysis is helpful (Gaventa, 2003). Instead of seeing power as a monolithic force that is wielded in top-down hierarchies, it can be conceived as something much more fluid that is enacted within networks of people through their everyday actions. Although on one hand this points to the hegemonic nature of power in education systems through dispersed control of knowledge and discourse, it also allows for multiple forms of resistance; individual and collective, organised and spontaneous.

Protagonismo is one such form.

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