INTRODUCTION:

Outside looking in, and inside looking out – attempts at bridging the academic/practitioner divide.

While the Student Voice agenda gathers momentum in all sectors of education in the United Kingdom so too does the degree to which ‘Student Voice’ comes under the critical gaze of national and international commentators. While the focus of Student Voice might have changed in policy, and as each successive government in the UK shapes the agenda as they see fit, the Student Voice movement itself continues to grow. Equally, international responses to Student Voice extend the debate and movement further. To acknowledge international and UK perspectives, this edited collection ‘speaks’ to both the practitioner and the academic alike. The Student Voice ‘movement’ is after all, in fact a broad church – it is multi-faceted, itself making inroads into a wide range of other educational practices and agendas from social justice education, concerns with citizenship-rich education and active citizenry, widening participation, safe guarding and action research to name but a few.

The term ‘Student Voice’ itself is highly contested. As Fielding (2009) suggests, ‘Student Voice’ is ‘a portmanteau term’. In speaking and writing about ‘voice’ we recognize its role as a ‘strategic shorthand’ and its limitations (Robinson and Taylor, 2006: 6). Since the literature as a whole uses – often interchangeably – ‘Student Voice’, ‘Learner Voice’ and ‘Pupil Voice’ we have done so here, allowing our contributors to set the terms as they see fit. Despite the diversity of reasons why individuals, practitioners and institutions become interested in and involved with student voice work and research, the requirement for capturing and utilizing voice remains, demonstrated here through a number of different practitioner case studies drawing upon different local, national and international contexts. In presenting these different contexts, we are conscious that the Student Voice movement represents something rather special in the field of education – an opportunity for theory and practice, researchers, academics, practitioners, teachers and (most importantly of all) learners to co-construct the meanings of what they do and how, when and why they do it. What is exciting about the Student Voice ‘movement’ is the diversity of practice and the commitment of learners and practitioners to the principles of social justice, democracy, active citizenry and children’s’ rights. This diversity is reflected in the contributions to this volume, where we bring together leading national and international academics and practitioners – many of whom are first-time writers.
On some levels, Student Voice is itself fundamentally bound-up with social justice and democracy. On other levels, Student Voice can be seen as a mechanism for school and college improvement. Occasionally schools and colleges pay lip-service to Student Voice and in doing so construct a discourse of ‘Student Voice’ which operates as a controlling agent – “an additional mechanism of control (Fielding, 2001:100). Furthermore, some commentators suggest that Student Voice is a ‘policy technology’ (Ball, 2001) providing ‘efficiency gains’ which aid and legitimate competition between educational institutions leading to increased marketization (Fielding and Bragg 2003; Gunter and Thompson, 2007).

Student Voice that is authentic and inclusive has the potential to subvert, undermine and transform limiting and limited market cultures and this means that there is some genuinely exciting, diverse, radical and meaningful practice ‘out there’. However, all too often educational practice is invisible – hidden away with academic and policy-makers’ voices taking priority over the stories of teachers and learners themselves. In this volume we seek to readdress this invisibility of practitioners’ work and make public the rich diversity of Student Voice practice in local contexts.

Aimed at policy makers and academics; teachers, teacher educators and trainee teachers; and other learners in the schools, Further Education and Higher Education context this book offers multiple perspectives and ‘voices’, drawing upon experiences and examples targeting educators and all stakeholders involved in Student Voice initiatives at local and international levels. It is through the combination of these perspectives that, as the title of the book suggests, the Student Voice movement can hope to ‘bridge the academic/practitioner divide’. Having said this, we recognise that, at times, this is an uneasy bridge, and moreover one built across an obstructive divide. In this volume we offer a number of different (and at times competing) theoretical frameworks and models; we also offer methodological guidance to researchers and practitioners keen to facilitate Student Voice in their work. The contributions in this volume draw upon the myriad and over-lapping relationships between Student Voice and action research, citizenship, democratic education and students-as-researchers as well as locating these debates within international perspectives. In doing so, they situate Student Voice as a valuable and powerful mechanism for educational change.

In Part One of this book we explore the theoretical tensions and ambiguities in the Student Voice movement. This Theorizing (of) Student Voice offers a range of competing interpretations of the value and promises of Student Voice. Following on from the theoretical frameworks
explored in Part One, in Part Two we consider Student Voice in Practice. In this section we explore a range of practitioner responses to Student Voice work from early childhood, through primary, secondary and lifelong learning as well as special education and Higher Education. In Part Three we consider the Role of Student Voice in Informing Teachers’ Professional Practice. In doing so we look at professional partnerships and learning partnerships between institutions, learners, teachers and learners and teachers. We explore how Student Voice can be used in such a way that teachers learn from learners. Part Four explores the Capturing of Student Voice so essential for the research enquiries that are at the heart of this volume. In this section we discuss the methodological, ethical and practical implications of Student Voice enquiry. Finally, in Part Five we turn our attention to Student Voices Around the World and offer a number of international and global perspectives from the USA, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Australia, Sweden, China and Brazil.

Our contributors in this uneasy divide between ‘academic’ and ‘practitioner’ are both outside looking in, and, inside looking out. In the case of some contributors to this volume, their practice and research is fully integrated into the often closed worlds of educational institutions. For some of these practitioners this is the first public forum in which their work has been published and presented to an outside audience. The contributors to this volume are themselves varied – as are the contributions they have produced. The stories and voices in this volume are as varied as the movement itself. The contributions in this volume conceive and problematize Student Voice in the following ways:

- Student Voice is a means to institutional development, growth and evolution; involving learners in key democratic decision-making.

- Student Voice is radical and subversive; democratic and empowering, irrespective of government agendas, global market forces and neo-liberal agendas.

- Some commentators in this volume are highly critical of the claims made by Student Voice research to ‘empower’, whereas others are critical of the ‘inauthentic’ use of Student Voice – the construction of student voices within managerial discourses.

- For others still, Student Voice is a means to develop young people’s citizenry and a means to ensure their safety, inclusion and participation in an ever-changing world. For these contributors, ‘authentic’ Student Voice has the power to enable learners and teachers to become co-conspirators in the meaning-making process that is democratic
education. And this ‘learning’ extends way beyond the narrow confines of the classroom walls.

This is what we mean by an ‘active-citizenship’ (Ruddock and Flutter, 2000) in its broadest sense - in order to develop learners who can participate in society in a socially responsible fashion we need to involve them in decision-making. We need to encourage and moreover ‘allow’ young people (and learners of, in fact, all ages) to have a voice as a means of educating them about their own role in the world, as much as their own role in their learning.

Developing research programmes and mechanisms through which voice can be captured is by no means simple. Some Student Voice practice comes with a warning (Ruddock and McIntyre, 2007; Fielding, 2004); namely that cynical attempts to capture learner voice for ‘performativity’ purposes alone end up perpetuating the cynical use of learners as ‘objects’ passive in their own educational journeys. As educators, we also must be prepared to hear things that we do not like. One thing is for certain, we are all enriched through the process of authentically listening – providing we not only listen, but also hear and act.

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References


