

Article title: Pedagogic voice: Student voice in teaching and engagement pedagogies

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Pedagogic voice: Student voice in teaching and engagement pedagogies

In this paper we are concerned with the notion of ‘pedagogic voice’. We recognise that within the schooling context ‘voice’ can represent many things. For instance, it can relate to organisational matters in terms of the kind of say students have in the day to day running of the school and it can also relate to the opportunities students have to challenge perceived injustices or to the way in which conflicts are mediated. These are all important considerations and tie in closely with notions of democracy and schooling. Pedagogic voice relates to the presence of students’ voice in teaching, learning and curriculum matters. A lack of voice in schools has been attributed to many marginalised students’ alienation from mainstream schooling. Drawing on interview data collected in an alternative, or second chance, school catering to many such students we demonstrate how attention to pedagogic voice can not only work to engage students in learning, but also improve civic engagement.

Keywords: student voice; democracy; alternative education; engagement; pedagogy

Introduction

In recent times, throughout the global North, a neoliberal reframing of educational policies has given rise to an increasing focus on measurement and comparison-based outcomes for schooling (Grek, 2013; Hursh, 2013; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Takayama, 2013). This currently popular paradigm of schooling has served to narrow the vision and purposes of education, whilst also ‘taming’ and restricting potentially creative pedagogies through accountability structures (Lingard, 2005). Consequently, teachers have less power to change the context of their daily practices. Flow-on effects for young people include a decline in possibilities for their democratic participation in schools making such institutions ‘less hospitable’ to young people (Mitra & Gross, 2009; Smyth, 2006). The effects of neoliberalism on educational policies have been well documented (see for example, Apple, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ball, 2012; Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti, 2013) and it is not our intention to explore them in this paper. Our allusion to them here is a reminder of

the contextual influences that currently delineate the work of teachers and consequently restrict democratic participation in schools by students.

It is somewhat ironic, that these restrictive education practices operate alongside government statements, such as those by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG, 2009), that promote and encourage outcomes such as democratic participation in society. For example, COAG (2009) indicated:

Children are also important for their future contribution to society—as the next generation of leaders, workers, parents, consumers and members of communities. Their ability to participate fully in society as adults will be largely shaped by their childhood experiences. (p. 7)

Additionally, there are other state-based reforms in the Australian states of New South Wales and Victoria (Harris & Manatakis, 2013; MacNaughton, Smith, & Lawrence, 2003) that encourage student participation and voice. Regardless of these developments, the aforementioned global directions are leading schooling further away from its democratic responsibility of developing Dewey's (1916) notion of 'active and engaged citizens'. As Ranson (2000) suggests, schooling should strive to develop 'active capability' in children and young people in relation to citizenship, enabling them to have confidence in their own voice and an ability to make a difference to their community.

This paper argues that one way of developing active capability and civic engagement is to respect the views of young people and to provide them with real opportunities to exercise them. This assists in the creation of student-centred learning (Andrews, 2010), and encourages and enables young people to participate actively in their schooling which, it could be argued, is fundamental to the development of a student voice (Ranson, 2000; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Identifying citizenship as participation (Jans, 2004) is crucial for young people who are some of the 'most informed, yet marginalised witnesses of schooling'

(Smyth, 2006, p. 279). Geddes (2000) suggests that ‘non-participation in the regular life of society’, can signify social exclusion where some young people feel isolated or marginalised from mainstream society. When this is coupled with inadequate educational achievement these problems may become compounded, resulting in a long-term disadvantage and socio-political alienation (Geddes, 2000).

The active participation of young people in the lives of their schools is further supported by the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations General Assembly resolution 44/25, 1989), that states that children¹ are capable of forming their own views and they have the right to ‘express those views freely in all matters affecting the child’ (Article 12). That is, young people have a *right* to be heard and to have their opinions taken into account on all matters relating to them, including education. Additionally, in Australia the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People* (DEEWR, 2008) states that all Australian Education Ministers should ‘seek to achieve new levels of engagement with all stakeholders in the education of young Australians’ (p. 5), which surely includes young people.

This paper proceeds through the following structure: we begin with a discussion of the concept of ‘pedagogic voice’ which is followed by a description of the research that underpins this paper and our methodological approach and theoretical framings. Data from an alternative school are then analysed in relation to the concept of pedagogic voice. A final section concludes by arguing that a focus on developing pedagogic voice improves both students’ engagement in learning and their civic engagement.

¹ The United Nations declaration identifies anyone under the age of 18 year as a child. For the remainder of this paper, we will use the collective term ‘young people’ given the age group of students at the research site.

Pedagogic voice

Notions of ‘student voice’ (cf Fielding, 2004b; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Rudduck, 2007) are conceptualised through Giroux’s (1986) ‘emancipatory pedagogy’ and more recently, Ranson’s (2000) ‘pedagogy of voice’, Lingard and Mills’ (2007) ‘socially just pedagogies’, as well as what Smyth, McInerney, and Fish (2013) refer to as the ‘pedagogy of engagement’ (also see Lingard, 2005 for a discussion on the term ‘pedagogy’). Building on this research, in this paper we draw on a combined understanding of ‘voice’, ‘pedagogy’ and ‘engagement’, conceiving of it as ‘pedagogic voice’ to identify a space within the literature where we are able to discuss young people’s active engagement, participation, and voice in the areas of teaching, learning, and the curriculum. Jans (2004) explains that while young people are often seen as ‘objects of protection’ within many societies, young people themselves often identify with the understanding that they are ‘autonomous individuals’ and capable ‘active citizens’ (p. 27). Consequently, providing young people with opportunities to find their pedagogic voice is one way schools can work towards building active capability and civic engagement (Ranson, 2000).

Rudduck and Fielding (2006) rhetorically ask why educators might want to engage student voice. However, the notion of encouraging young people to participate in pedagogy-related decision-making facilitates situations where teachers and young people engage in meaningful teaching and learning has been well supported in research (Lingard and Mills, 2007; Ruddock, 2007). Additionally, young people who are disengaged from schooling often cite their ‘dislike for school’, a lack of ‘being heard’ and being treated unjustly as their main reasons for wanting to leave school without completing the final year of their studies (McGregor and Mills, 2012; Curtis & McMillan, 2008). A report by Lamb and Rice (2008) suggests that there are significant life-long consequences for early school leavers in that they are ‘more likely to become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer, have lower earnings,

and over the life-course accumulate less wealth' (p. 1). Clearly there is an imperative to find ways to facilitate schooling engagement so as to address such socially unjust outcomes. We agree with Smyth et al. (2013) that providing young people with opportunities to find their 'pedagogic voice' has the potential to make a difference in this area.

Here we emphasise that 'voice' suggests *dialogue*; that is to say, there must be active 'listening' by all parties for it to be effective. Here, Rudduck (2007) identifies such dialogues as 'consulting' young people:

Consultation is a form of student voice that is purposeful, is undertaken in some kind of partnership with teachers, and usually initiated by teachers... Consultation is a way of hearing what young people think within a framework of collaborative commitment to school reform. Consultation implies participation. (p. 590)

Being consulted also implies 'membership' of the school community which in turn, encourages young people to feel an increased sense of belonging and a greater positivity about learning (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). This membership or inclusion can lead to a 'stronger sense of partnership' (Rudduck, 2007, p. 587) where young people and teachers work together, or as Fielding (2004b) suggests teachers, 'speaking with rather than speaking for' young people with the goal of developing meaningful pedagogy (p. 305). However, developing a young person's pedagogic voice with the purpose of developing meaningful and engaging pedagogy does not always imply democratic practices. Teachers are the gatekeepers of learning (Mitra, 2009) and mediate government policies and school requirements in their teaching practices. Consequently, young people may not always have equal rights. This situation sits at odds with the aims of democratic schooling which typically state that students have the right to:

... make their own choices regarding learning and all other areas of everyday life. In particular, they may individually determine what to do, when, where, how and with whom, so long as their decisions do not infringe on the liberty of others to do the same, [and] to have

an equal share in the decision making as to how their organisations – in particular their schools – are run, and which rules and sanctions, if any, are necessary. (EUDEC, 2011)

Thus, we are mindful of the tensions that exist between claims for student voice and the schooling contexts in Australia and elsewhere that make democratic education very difficult to achieve.

Many researchers (Bahou, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004b; Flutter, 2006; Groundwater-Smith, 2011; Mitra, 2006; Smyth et al. 2013), while acknowledging the value of student voice pedagogies, have critiqued certain motivations for evoking student voice as manipulative and tokenistic. Fielding (2004b) introduces the notion of ‘manipulation incorporation’ when he suggests, ‘The intention is to avoid the equally mistaken polar opposites of, on the one hand, ignoring or excluding the speech of the marginalized group, and, on the other hand, treating its inclusion as unproblematically insightful and liberating’ (p. 296 and 305). Bragg (2007) questions ‘the hidden coercion in “voice”, whose interests it serves and the value of silence’ (p. 344). Both authors are suggesting that student voice is mediated and therefore can be prone to manipulation. For example, Smyth et al. (2013) explain that sometimes the inclusion of young people’s voices is related to ‘performative imperatives of the system’ rather than an attempt to ‘mobilise a curriculum that is more attentive to the lives and needs of young people’ (p. 309). In another example, Fielding (2004a) suggests that ‘opportunistic forms of student voice’ are often contrived through neo-liberal perspectives, where young people may be consulted about their learning so that ‘standards rise and attainment improves’ for reasons of measurement and comparison data rather than developing active citizenship in school communities (p. 203 and 208).

As well as student voice being used manipulatively, it is also often critiqued as being used tokenistically. Robinson and Taylor (2007) add that ‘listening to pupils itself is not sufficient, it is what happens with the information, what is done with it, that is also of great

importance' (p. 14). When no action is taken, young people do not have an authentic and active voice, and consequently, voice becomes a tokenistic action of no value for promoting democratic engagement or change. Groundwater-Smith (2011) explains:

Much of what purports to employ the voices of young people as a form of authentic dialogue is conducted within spaces where the power relationships are significantly distorted in favour of the adult. At worst this contributes to existing technologies of power, at best to paternalism and tokenism. (p. 55)

We now turn to our case study in order to explore these issues further.

Research context

The data presented here were derived from Elkhorn Community College (ECC) over a period of 18 months in 2013-2014. The school is part of a broader on-going research project examining schooling practices and social justice. This project utilises qualitative methodologies including interviews, field observations, field notes, photographs, and school and student documents and artefacts. For the purposes of this paper, only interview data from ECC are used. Staff and students were all invited to participate. Researchers from the project attended morning groups meetings and told students why we were there and offered invitations to participate. Parental or guardian consent, alongside student consent, was sought where students had such supports. However, students who lived independently provided their own informed consent. Interviews were conducted with eight staff members and 18 young people. Several participants were interviewed on more than one occasion.

Whilst the school only employed five workers, due to turnover of staff in the positions of principal, teacher and youth and community worker, we were able to interview eight different people who occupied these roles over the course of the project. Pseudonyms are used for the names of all participants, including the College, for reasons of privacy and confidentiality. The broader research being conducted at this school is concerned with the

practices and philosophies utilised by staff to engage and re-engage marginalised young people in learning. In this paper our focus is upon the ways in which democratic participation by young people at the site may have been facilitated by the approaches taken by the staff at the site; therefore, our data are predominantly focused on the actions and attitudes of the teachers. In this paper we use the term ‘pedagogic voice’ to describe the ways young people may have influence over the context and content of their learning. Our selections of data have been chosen according to the thematic connections we have identified between our understandings of this concept of ‘pedagogic voice’ and the evidence we found. We are not suggesting that the results of this study are generalisable; but rather that the teaching and learning experiences documented at this site may provide opportunities for deeper reflection about our understandings of the pedagogical relationships with young people in schooling contexts and the ways these may be improved for better democratic engagement of students.

Elkhorn Community College (ECC) is an independent, non-government, and non-fee paying school providing educational programs for young people in years 10, 11 and 12 who have not been served well by mainstream schooling. The school is partly funded by the Queensland government’s Special Assistance Schools Program² and partly through Commonwealth government funding for independent schools. The College is located in a low socioeconomic suburb of Brisbane in the state of Queensland, Australia, in a non-purpose built facility with two multi-purpose buildings separated by a small park. At the time we were at the College, there was an enrolment of approximately sixty young people and five staff, comprising a principal, two teachers, and two youth and community development workers one of whom was completing teaching qualifications. This has changed since, with the retirement of the founding principal, Patrick, and the addition of two co-principals, Dalton and Fleur. Given that this paper is predominantly about the visual arts program at the school,

² See <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/grants/non-state/assistance.html>

the data are drawn from interviews with the visual arts teacher and the current and former principals. We note that the school is unusual in its size and focus, although the growth of this type of school in Australia has been extraordinary (te Riele, 2014) and a concern with such schools has been attracting interest within the education research academy in multiple locations (see for example, Hayes, 2012; Mills & McGregor 2014; te Riele, 2014; Thomson, 2014; Thomson & Russell, 2007; Smyth, McInerney & Fish, 2013). However, we would suggest that lessons this school provides in relation to the focus on pedagogic voice, especially given a student population often considered ‘unteachable’, have relevance to schools with far larger populations.

The young people at ECC have a range of complex social and learning support needs, leading them to reject or be rejected by mainstream schools. The College offers a range of formal and informal learning education and training options for young people including the state’s curriculum authority’s courses in literacy and numeracy, and certificate courses in vocational education and training. The College also offers structured project-based learning options in visual arts, computer technology, adventure-based learning, and living skills. While drawing on all aspects of the school’s curriculum, the visual arts program is the main focus of this paper.

Elkhorn Community College visual arts program

The ECC visual arts program was developed and has been delivered by an early career teacher, Rita, since the school was established, as such, this paper draws predominantly on her views and those of the principals, Patrick, Dalton and Fleur. Rita outlined her background, how she came to work at ECC, and aspects of establishing a new school:

I finished my teaching diploma in 2010 and I have been working as an artist and I got involved at Victoria Meadows flexible learning centre³ through just knowing people in the community; and did a couple of days a week there for a bit. And through that, I heard that there was another school starting and Patrick has lots of links with that school, as he used to be the principal there. So it was just through the family ... I originally thought it would be really interesting to work in a school that was starting, establishing itself ... I have enjoyed watching it grow so quickly. Like, every term we are radically a new place, taking on new strategies and new perspectives and ways of working; and I have enjoyed that process of growing very quickly, especially because it was pretty much the start of my teaching career as well ... We are getting very good at change and not being afraid to try new things. And I like that approach.

Rita explained her approach to the visual arts program as ‘art therapy’ and how she integrated literacy and numeracy into her programs:

I have been supporting literacy/numeracy projects with an art focussed project; and then also having art as a safe learning area where people can explore the materials. On the spectrum, I have got it as "art therapy" all the way to supporting them in their other learning areas. So for art and numeracy, we have been doing a whole lot of drawings, almost technical drawings, using compasses and rulers. We have been doing sacred⁴ geometry; we have been doing tessellations; we have been doing the golden ratio and things like that.

Rita was passionate about the benefits of her art therapy program and demonstrated understanding of the young people’s backgrounds and lifestyles. She explained:

I feel like I give them an alternative to depression. I feel like most of my students are constantly talking about drugs and alcohol and getting high and I flip the conversations as early as I can into, "You don't have to have X, Y, or Z - there are natural ways of being high and experiencing elation and art is one of them". And it requires more work

³ See Mills & McGregor (2014)

⁴ ‘Sacred geometry involves sacred universal patterns used in the design ... most often seen in sacred architecture and sacred art. The basic belief is that geometry and mathematical ratios, harmonics and proportion are also found in music, light, cosmology.’ <http://www.crystalinks.com/sg.html>

but I feel that's half of the problem, the era that they have grown up in, that everything is instant and you don't have to sit still and do something; they don't have that discipline, maybe. So they are just bored and depressed.

It is within this school context that we explore pedagogic voice and its relationship to the visual arts curriculum.

Pedagogic voice and the curriculum

There are many institutional and personal gains associated with encouraging young people to find their pedagogic voice as well as the opportunities to address issues of concern to them within schooling structures. The institutional benefits associated with encouraging young people to participate include improved personal capability and potential (Ranson, 2000), capacity building for present and future democratic participation in society (Mitra, 2009), and thus the development of critical thinking in individuals who are able, in turn, to challenge and change injustices in society. Personal gains include the development of confident, self-aware young citizens (Ranson, 2000), who are able to build and maintain strong relationships that are based in trust and openness (Mitra, 2009). Institutional and personal gains associated with pedagogic voice are clearly linked to an individual's identity both within and separate from their community identity (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Rita, the teacher associated with the art program, explained:

Definitely, it's given them an identity in this community. It's given us an area to praise them, their contribution to our community, because we have started having exhibitions. Definitely, it's giving them an identity; ... they were just people on the outskirts of our community who rarely attended or when they did attend, there were fights and a few meetings and issues. So I am quite passionate about that side of the art program and really amazed that it's happening.

Many of these institutional and personal gains associated with young people developing their

pedagogic voice will be discussed in terms of a number of practices at ECC that appear to develop active capability in young people. These include community membership associated with the ownership of practices and decision-making related to the young people's learning and improved engagement; and encouraging curricular choice and the inclusion of personal interests and strengths within a school environment that is flexible and encourages individual freedom while balancing these with a young person's required progress at school.

Ownership, membership, and engagement

Inclusive classroom practices that promote ownership and engagement enable young people to become 'agents in their own learning' (Rainer & Matthews, 2002, p. 22). There are also institutional gains such as building active capability in young people as part of a democratised classroom (Schneider, 2010), where young people develop opportunities to effect change (O'Neill, 2010). There has been a significant amount of research (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1995; Mitra, 2006; O'Neill, 2010; Rainer & Matthews, 2002; Smyth, 2006) into the benefits of encouraging young people to take ownership of their learning. McGregor, Mills, de Riele, and Hayes (2014) link ownership with 'meaningful learning' suggesting that the more young people are able to participate in supportive environments and make learning their own, the more meaningful their learning will become.

At the time of our visits to ECC, particularly in visual art classes, young people were encouraged to take on the role of student facilitators. Drew, one of the student facilitators, explained:

They give us the opportunity in class of taking the role of student facilitator... And, also, when we do the literacy assignments when we are presenting something, we are the facilitator. So they do a lot of that... And we run a class, when they go away to the camp, we run the class, like a facilitator again.

Rita, the visual arts teacher, added her perspective of the practice of student facilitators:

They just basically facilitated the group, with a bit of guidance, and they really enjoyed that and it was really fun. I liked sitting there. I just did some reflective stuff on how everything was going ... and they just set everyone up. Yeah, we're trying to encourage that facilitation a lot more as well.

At first glance, the notion of student facilitators may appear simplistic, even tokenistic, however, this practice creates a space that demonstrates to the young people that they are valued contributors to the learning process (O'Neill, 2010, p. 16). As Rita affirmed in relation to a project that they were undertaking in the local community:

It's nice now that we have done the "street art" project for a term and a half now and some young people are really owning it ... So I am really happy for Drew and Serge to be the coordinators and to run it.

Such ownership structures create a 'culture of communication and trust' between the teachers and the young people (O'Neill, 2010, p. 15). Ownership of learning, and consequently membership of and belonging to the learning community develops and evolves from these structures and practices as they provide young people with a pedagogic voice (Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1995).

Ownership of learning, when linked to membership to the school's learning community also develops active and civic capability. Rita gave an example of students reclaiming a learning space after it had been vandalised:

I had a lovely incident the other day where one of the young people came and got me and said, "Somebody's chalked up the whole back area and they have written really inappropriate things". They were accusing someone of doing it. It was like, "It wasn't even me, ma'am," and it wasn't him in the end. But the whole point was, then they went, "Where's the bucket? Where's the sponges? Let's clean it up, so we can do street art on Friday. Come on." And three or four of them did that. I just got the buckets and went, "Cool".

This situation demonstrated the students' sense of community responsibility following an

incident where someone defaced their art work space. 'Responsibility' is a key element of ownership (Rainer & Matthews, 2002) and increased responsibility is a significant aspect of democratic participation (Schneider, 2010). As this incident shows, the young people worked together to clean their work space, even though they were not the ones who perpetrated the damage.

Ownership practices can also have many personal gains for young people. Rita explained, '[Students as facilitators] can help develop their own identity and stretch their own identity and I really like watching that happening. It is really cool. It is really satisfying.' However, in order for this to occur, teachers also need to be able to surrender their role of perceived 'expert' (Schneider, 2010). Additionally, such practices foster respect for all members of the learning community, including the development of appropriate behaviours when interacting and communicating with other people, as well as care and empathy for their teachers. Rita added,

The other thing that happens, too, is their empathy for us as workers/teachers expands because they see how difficult it is to run a group or how difficult it is to facilitate something; and then they in turn, when they are being participants, are more respectful and more caring. Because that's another thing that's happening lately, I am noticing young people are being more caring of me and of workers ... which is so nice because for ages it felt like an uphill battle and it was really draining, whereas this kind of new way of being, where they are taking on roles.

Here, the relational gains are evident to Rita.

Practices that promote young people's ownership of their learning also promote increased student engagement. Andrews (2010) explains that in her classroom, young people went from 'reluctant learner to engaged learner' (p. 41). Dalton, the co-principal at ECC, gave an example of a student he was working with:

She's engaged twice more since then ... Because I stopped forcing her to do it [her work]. So that was like this barrier between her and I. Like, I was just this asshole who wanted to make her do this stuff she hated... Over time she goes, "Yeah, maybe he's someone that I can trust." And when she sat down, I talked to her a bit about her maths, she will say, "I am a dummy." She wouldn't have said that to me before.

Here, the teacher and the student become co-participants in the practice of learning that is based on trust and respect (Mitra, 2009). The young person took responsibility for her learning, after the teachers 'stopped forcing' her to do specific work. Consequently, we see a shift in this young person's learning identity from a 'passive recipient of information' to an active learner (O'Neill, 2010, p. 16). Additionally, a relationship between the teacher and the student starts to form to the point where she opens up to Dalton about her learning insecurities. Mills and McGregor (2014) also note that positive pedagogical relationships between young people and adults often encourage students to reconnect to learning. This element of ownership that promotes enhanced engagement in learning will be discussed in the next section of the paper in relation to the curriculum choice and individual interests.

Curriculum choice, interests, and negotiation

The provision of choice and where possible, the inclusion of young people's interests in the curriculum is an element of student ownership and of being heard in schools. Rainer and Matthews (2002) suggest that 'choice, voice, and shared authority are critical elements in most definitions of ownership' (p. 25). As noted earlier, it is another practice that develops inclusivity and provides opportunities for young people to establish agency. At ECC, young people were able to choose their classes for the day. Dalton, the co-principal explained the sign-up process:

When I started, we did have, like, "You are in class A, B or C," and we had mountain names for them. Second semester this year, it's very much "choose your own adventure".

So at our morning meeting, our community forum in the morning, I kind of think it as: I “advertise” what I have got on. I try to get some people to “buy it”; and then they sign up or they don't sign up in the morning for my activity.

Consequently, this practice potentially enables personal and institutional gains as young people are encouraged to make better judgements (Ranson, 2000). Young people at ECC appeared to understand the guidelines for their choices and they were made aware of any upcoming responsibilities and timelines for the completion of certain activities. Within such a structure, Miliband (2006) suggests ‘curriculum choice engages and respects students’ (p. 25), and this respect works toward addressing students’ sense of alienation from schooling.

Within the ethos of offering young people choice, ECC also worked towards incorporating young people’s interests and needs into the curriculum (Miliband, 2006). Patrick, the former principal explained his philosophy of the ‘educational archaeologist’:

“Oh, you are a skateboarder. There is Maths in there. There's - you know a lot of stuff.” So it's digging around and being an educational archaeologist, trying to find stuff in their life based on the assumption that there will be. Somewhere in their story, there's stuff that we can validate and respect and build on.

Patrick spent time with the young people at ECC and engaged them in conversations about their interests. Such practices of incorporating choice and utilising personal interests in the curriculum were often negotiated and co-created at ECC. Dalton explained:

They have some say over what things on offer are; a couple of times this semester they have chosen - so someone else has said, "No, we don't like the three things, but a couple of us want to do dance. Could we have a dance session?" So then that gets negotiated.

However, given the many structural and legal parameters of schooling, within which schools like ECC have to operate, it is not always possible to grant students their preferred choices. Dalton described one situation that demonstrated the need to contextualise student choices

within dialogues that create deep understandings about the reasons for certain decisions and possible lines of consequences if they are not made:

So then there's a big conversation about, "What are things that we can negotiate over and what things we can't negotiate about"; For example, one day, one group just wanted to go swimming at a water hole. Like, "Yeah, that can happen, but not today." And then they can react to that quite negatively. So there's a bit of work to do around that.

The fact that these young people might react negatively to a failure to get exactly what they choose indicates that contextualising work needs to be made a stronger part of the negotiations. Dalton, the co-principal, gave another example of a dialogue with other staff members regarding a young person who perhaps took his understanding of personal freedom and school flexibility 'too far' in that he appeared to have made a decision not to participate:

I am kind of thinking, "He doesn't come to me. I don't see him doing anything with anybody else. Is he actually getting anything out of us?" So, okay, I had better ask the others ... "Do you see him turning up doing anything?" They are going, "No. No." "Okay, well, I have got to talk to him. I have to sit down with him and his mum and go, "you said your plan was to get into a mechanics workshop and we agreed that you were going to come in numeracy twice a week. It is not happening. What's - is that still your plan?"

Staff were committed to developing greater understandings with the young people as demonstrated by Dalton's reflections on what he needed to do to respond to this situation.

Troy, a youth worker, elaborated on this:

We are still trying to find what the balance is between probably effective and healthy pedagogy and the flexibility to allow young people to guide and affect their own learning.

Consequently, while freedom and flexibility are important in a school where there is an evident commitment to integrate student voice into school organisation in a meaningful way,

as at ECC, this is often done within a framework of monitoring young people's progress towards their educational goals and negotiating a way forward.

Discussion and conclusion

The current moment in education has not been kind to those most likely to be harmed by a schooling system that puts a low priority on inclusion, democracy and social justice in comparison to economic competitiveness, market forces and performativity. However, as we indicated in the introduction to this paper, curriculum and policy documents often advocate supporting students to become active citizens as a key purpose of schooling. This can open up spaces to discussing more progressive student centred agendas as such a concern relates to both learning *about* and *doing* democracy. As many others have done, we suggest that the two should not be mutually exclusive (for example Ranson, 2000). We would contend that 'voice', doing democracy, is a critical component of students' learning how to be active citizens and in practising such citizenship. Thus whilst we are concerned with the ways in which students can exercise voice in order to be involved in the civic life of schools, our focus here has been on pedagogic voice as a democratic act. Here we suggest that a commitment to democracy, and social justice, would ensure that student voice was also integrated into teaching, learning and curriculum matters.

The degree to which students have a voice in their schools exists along a continuum spanning little/none through to complete equality with staff as evidenced in schools that are self-styled democratic schools that prioritise the development of shared understandings about individual freedom couched within the context of communal responsibilities (Mills and McGregor, 2014; Flutter, 2006). Whilst ECC does not identify as a democratic school, it does draw upon many of the principles of democratic schooling via its utilisation of student voice in respect of the curriculum and pedagogy. In the paper we have emphasised the significance

of listening, that is, that voice not just be a tokenistic opportunity for students to articulate their thoughts and concerns with no dialogue and action accompanying this. At ECC there appears to be a serious attempt in the visual arts program, especially through student facilitators, and in the curriculum negotiation processes, to ensure that students' voices are integrated into the learning activities.

The examples presented, we suggest, support the value of these practices in terms of engaging young people in learning and engendering a sense of belonging to their school. The arts program and its engagement with the community through biannual art exhibitions of students' work and the street art project that engaged street artists to work with the young people at ECC and then culminated in the group designing and painting a mural wall sponsored by the local council. These art projects worked to enhance students' capabilities not only in terms of their learning but also in terms of their civic engagement. The sense of ownership of their work space and belonging to the school was evident in their clean-up of the building wall on which they did much of their artwork. Their involvement in the pedagogical relationship as student facilitator also gave them insights into what it means to be a teacher and an opportunity to develop their pedagogic capabilities. The listening, dialogue and negotiating with students also enabled, as indicated in the example considered here, some young people to shift from a position of reluctant learner to engaged learner. Opportunities for teachers to outline the offerings for the day and the students to make choices about which opportunities they would take up facilitated discussions about knowledge and meaningful learning, discussions which are a critical component of developing students' pedagogic voice. As such, ECC is working to support an approach to education that rejects deficit notions of marginalised students and to suggest ways of working that actively engage young people.

ECC operates on the margins of the education system, it is rarely a school of first choice for students, and many of the young people end up at the school after all other avenues

have been exhausted. However, for many, once they arrive they indicate that this is the first time in a very long period when they have actively become engaged in their learning. Ironically, the vast majority of these young people had been deemed unteachable by former schools, yet we witnessed them actively engaged in their own learning and in supporting others' learning. There are perhaps lessons here for mainstream schools. We are not suggesting that this type of learning occurred all the time, and that there were not instances of disruption or conflict, that would give a distorted view of the school, after all, for many of these young people the issues and problems they faced in their everyday life were extreme and these did not disappear upon entering the school grounds. However, at the same time, this was a school where students indicated that they felt safe and respected, and importantly heard. The former principal, Patrick, noted that the teachers had to become 'educational archaeologists' in order to understand each student's story and to 'validate', 'respect' and 'build on' their interests, experiences and needs. In terms of what is important, the words of the famous archaeologist David Hurst Thomas (1989) comes to mind here: 'It's not what you find, it's what you find out' (p. 31). In our view, paying attention to pedagogic voice enables teachers to both 'find out' and to be surprised by the capabilities of all their students, especially students like those at ECC who have been constructed as unteachable.

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