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## **“Student voice in learning: Instrumentalism and tokenism or opportunity for altering the status and positioning of students?”**

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### **Abstract**

Student voice literature has been well mapped with a range of participatory frameworks and typologies over the last three decades. These acknowledge neoliberal uses of voice that reflect a pervasive marketised Education approach, where young people are consumers, teachers surveilled, and leaders are wedged between government and community accountability. We draw upon typologies from the field to investigate Principals’ conceptions of student voice in Aotearoa/ New Zealand schools. Practitioner awareness of the instrumentalism of particular voice strategies and associated critiques of their application provides alignment with a conception of education as a mode of making explicit social and political practice. The article highlights tensions where systemic improvement is prioritised over student agency and the right of young people to democratic participation in their schooling.

### **Keywords:**

**Student voice, pupil voice, student participation, student agency**

### **Introduction**

In schools, student voice can involve leaders, teachers and other stakeholders asking students about their views on a range of topics from pedagogical approaches to schooling redesign. Initiatives can be inclusive, with young people collaborating with adults to address problems in schools and, in some instances, taking leadership roles (Mitra, Serriere, and Stoicovy 2012; Mitra, Serriere, and Kirshner 2014). Voice initiatives serve a range of purposes, engaging students in their school communities and enhancing youth attachment to schooling contexts (Mitra 2004). However, it has also been argued that attempts to democratically involve students in their schooling can be largely tokenistic (Pleasant 2016). The purpose of this article is to consider how voice work serves a range of purposes and to raise issues around the status and positioning of students in pedagogic and governance partnerships.

The student voice movement, with its links to critical theory (Nelson 2017), the rights of the child to be heard (Groundwater-Smith 2011), citizenship education (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2016) and radical democracy (Fielding 2012) has long advocated transformative curricula that “give learners a sense that they can act on the world” (Rudduck and Flutter 2000, 87). Voice involves “having presence, power, and agency... the opportunity to speak one’s mind, be heard and counted by others, and, perhaps, to have an influence on outcomes” (Cook-Sather 2006, 363). Likewise, student voice work is premised on notion that “educational institutions are saturated with inequitable power structures, processes, practices and relations” including “power relations between students and teachers, power relations between students and researchers, and power relations between students” (Mayes et al. 2017, 1)

Student voice as a concept is a “catch all” that Hall (2017) suggests competes between two narratives –“student voice as democratic and transformational; and student voice as ‘policy’ and strategic initiative” (180). There is a rich plethora of literature on voice work advocating generative democratic practices that enable agency in young people (Mayes 2016a; Nelson 2014) and radical participation, which creates a “cultural shift [and] opens up spaces and minds... to the presence and power of students (Cook-Sather 2006). However we argue here that performativity and accountability concerns that are detailed in policy documents (New Zealand Government 2016) are an important backdrop to voice work in schools. Performativity .is a discourse that normalises the measurement of outputs or outcomes (Ball, 2003), where teachers and students participate in an ‘audit culture’ that impacts on identities (Keddie, 2016). A focus on audit can produce schooling cultures in which school leaders take up pedagogic voice in instrumental ways as a means to leverage change in teaching, learning and curriculum (McGregor and Mills 2016). In the case of Aotearoa/New Zealand, leaders have engaged with the indigenous voices of Māori students to address social disadvantage (Fitzpatrick 2016; Berryman and Lawrence 2017). This article draws from a typology of approaches to student voice (Fielding 2012; Lodge 2005; Mitra 2004) to examine the way that school leaders in Aotearoa/ New Zealand locate voice in their schooling contexts.

In the following sections a review of literature on student voice is provided to define prominent influences in the field and the case study research introduced. Various typologies, and aspects of them, are used to analyse qualitative comments from school leaders. Consideration is given to how student voice is located within the politics of schooling as described by school leaders. The article adds to the corpus of research that critiques instrumentalist voice strategies (Charteris and Smardon 2018; Nelson 2017; Mayes 2017) as a device to govern students and teachers and promote systemic improvement over the right of students to democratic participation in schooling.

### **Student voice – a contested terrain**

It became apparent in the 1990s that the voices of young people were omitted from discussions about learning, teaching, and schooling and the field become mobilised

(Cook-Sather 2006). In the years since, we have seen projects that promote the agentic and political voices of students. In Victoria, Australia, students have set up a democratic network of Student Representative Councils (Youth Affairs Council of Victoria 2012). The Dewey Elementary School research project promoted a focus on civic education to foster “critical democracy” and the positioning of students as “efficacious social actors” (Mayes, Mitra, and Serriere 2016, 606; See also Mitra and Serriere 2015). Helen Beattie’s (2012) ‘Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together’ project, involving a network of secondary schools in Vermont USA, was an initiative where students undertook action research. They worked with teachers to investigate the quality of students’ educational experiences. For a further example of co-agency see Alison Peacock’s ‘Creating, Learning without Limits’ (Swann et al. 2012).

Although projects like those above that are premised on student agency have emerged in the last thirty years of student voice research, the field, and associated power relations pertaining to student status in schools, remains problematic (Nelson 2017). In the year 2000, voice research trailblazers Rudduck and Flutter made the observation:

In a climate that respects the market and the consumer it is strange that pupils in school have not been seen as consumers worth consulting. We need to understand more about why we haven’t taken account of the views of pupils and why the situation is now beginning to change (Rudduck and Flutter 2000, 183).

Arguably, it is a case of ‘be careful what you wish for’. We have seen an upsurge of research in the student voice field (Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca and Artiles 2017) and a use of voice to “legitimate neo-liberal marketisation of education”, positioning students (consumers) with “voice” and “choice” (Arnot and Reay 2007, 311). Fielding (2012) articulates this enticement of participation as the “Scylla of performativity and the Charybdis of perpetual consumption” (48). All action in education is embedded in politics of race, class and gender. Therefore, voice research raises questions around how students are located in the discursive politics of schooling where, as subjects, they are produced through the self-technologies that serve the mechanisms of advanced capitalism. This move has been mobilised by a quality assurance drive, where external agencies (Lodge 2005), leaders (Mitra, Serriere, and Stoicovy 2012), and teachers (Bragg 2007a) use voice as data to indicate the effectiveness of teaching programs in operation.

As a “normative project” (Taylor and Robinson 2009, 161), conventional voice approaches have limitations. Voice implies that students need to be articulate to influence the conditions that produce their student subjectivities. With an emphasis on the “maintenance of power and privilege”, “the resistances of individuals and groups to social and cultural reproductions of inequalities”, and especially their silences on schooling matters, may be downplayed (Mayes 2016a, 85). Voice work can overlook the complex matrices of sexual orientation, social class and gender and in doing so

“create new networks or relations of power, or reinforce existing ones” (Bragg 2007b, 356). Thus a tokenistic approach to student voice may well have an adverse effect by disenfranchising and alienating the very young people they were aimed to engage (Herriot 2013). Herriot (2013) argues that a non-tokenising approach to student voice work can enable youth to “speak freely without fear of retaliation, contribute to identifying, framing and articulating matters on the agenda... [with] some level of youth authority on actions taken...” (Herriot 2013, 38). While there is scope for student initiative in this interpretation of voice, the capacity to ‘speak freely’ simplifies both the notion of dialogic interaction and the relations of power in schooling spaces. For Lodge (2005), the idea of speaking freely without retaliation underestimates the highly influential nature of adults in voice gathering processes. She notes “adults manipulate children’s voices to carry their own message and deny or disguise their own involvement” (133). Furthermore, students’ voices may ventriloquise, “being used to speak the adults’ messages” (Lodge 2005, 133).

With burgeoning interest in the field of student participation and voice, authors have developed typologies to enable educators to consider the particular purposes and consequences of voice approaches (Hart 1992; Thomson and Holdsworth 2003). In 2004, Mitra framed the benefits and challenges of schooling reform typology as ‘Listening’, ‘Collaboration’, and ‘Leadership’. Dwelling on the political use of voice in reform Lodge (2005) developed a typology of approaches to student voice that encompassed four dimensions- quality control, students as a source of information, compliance and control, and dialogue. Fielding (2001, 2012) is another influential figure in the field of engaging with and interrogating student voice. Extending Lodge’s work, he sets out a typology that suggests six forms of interaction between young people and adults both within schools contexts and in other educational spaces (Fielding 2012). These are:

- Students as data source – in which staff utilise information about student progress and well-being.
- Students as active respondents – in which staff invite student dialogue and discussion to deepen learning/professional decisions.
- Students as co-enquirers - in which staff take a lead role with high-profile, active student support.
- Students as knowledge creators – in which students take lead roles with active staff support.
- Students as joint authors – in which students and staff decide on a joint course of action together.
- Intergenerational learning as lived democracy – in which there is a shared commitment to/responsibility for the common good. (Fielding 2012, 50)

More recently Pearce and Wood (2016) have proposed a framework to evaluate the degree to which voice work enables socially transformative schooling practices. It

could be seen as a nuanced discussion of processes that Fielding (2011, 67) termed “intergenerational learning as lived democracy”. They suggest that voice should be dialogic, intergenerational, collective and inclusive, and transgressive. Dialogic activity here flattens social relations and evades the hierarchical norms of schooling power relations. Recognising that often voice work is undertaken with ‘ideal students’, it is a challenge to ensure that work includes those whose voices are difficult to hear (Keddie 2016). Often they are “in a minority; they are difficult to understand; they are silenced in and out of school, by choice or by hegemonic or coercive forces; or even because the voices are aggressive, rude or obnoxious” (Pearce and Wood 2016, 9). The transgressive dimension identified by Pearce and Wood (2016), posits that voice work in schooling contexts can enable students to access “tools or medium” through which they can “resist, escape or transform systems that promote inequality” (11).

The research here involves Principals who as leaders have significant input into the processes of student participation used in schools. While there is literature on teachers in student voice initiatives (Groundwater Smith and Mockler 2016), less has been written evoking the perspectives of school Principals (Baroutsis, McGregor, and Mills 2016). Having mapped some of the contested aspects of student voice work and existing typologies, we now draw across these various typologies to interpret data from a study undertaken with Aotearoa/ New Zealand Principals.

### **The case study**

This case study (Yin 2009) is part of a larger investigation into professional learning and assessment for learning in Aotearoa/ New Zealand schools. The use of student voices can enable teachers to gain a substantive understanding of teaching and learning processes, serving as a catalyst to develop the way that they regard students and their learning (Flutter 2007). It is a practice widely embedded in approaches to professional development learning in Aotearoa/ New Zealand and seen as a primary vehicle for feedback that can assist teacher reflection and learning (Nelson 2012).

After ethical permission was given through the University of New England, all schools in Aotearoa/ New Zealand received an email invitation providing a link to an online survey, and 215 participants across New Zealand primary and secondary schools agreed to participate. Of these 215 participants, 38 Principals each agreed to one semi-structured Skype interview of approximately 30 to 40 minutes duration. The Principals were asked:

*What is learner agency?*

*To what extent, and in what ways, do you use student voice in your schools?*

These questions were included because learner agency is an aspect associated with the New Zealand curriculum at this time (Ministry of Education 2016) and student voice has been linked with the notion of empowering learners (Taylor and Robinson, 2009) and agency (Riddle, 2017). The data in this article is drawn from the Principals’ responses pertaining to the latter question. This study centres on the results generated

from this qualitative question above. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed as a part of the data collection process. Data analysis was undertaken as an inductive approach assisted by the qualitative software NVivo. Any reference to voice was coded as a category itself and from there the data was manually examined to look for elements from across the voice typologies (Fielding 2012, Lodge 2005, Mitra 2004; Pearce and Wood 2016). The researchers independently examined the voice category data to identify repetitions and then met to discuss and agree on emerging themes. Themes emerged pertaining to the role of children in the provision of information for schooling improvement, power asymmetries, and reciprocity between teachers and students. These themes were further refined into dimensions taken from the typologies, as illustrated below.

The comments below is drawn from the transcripts of nine Principals (See Table 1.). These cases were selected from the 38 interviews on the basis that they provide an illustration of the themes that were matched to dimensions taken from the typologies through the authors' data reduction process. The dimensions were selected because they best illustrated and refined the emerging data themes. The cases serve to provide an exemplification of the politics of voice in some Aotearoa schools.

Table 1. Information on the School Contexts of the Principal Participants.

| <b>Principal Pseudonym</b> | <b>Type of School</b>               | <b>Number of Students</b> | <b>School Location</b> |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Marlene                    | primary<br>Years 1-6                | 200                       | urban                  |
| Sarah                      | primary<br>Years 1-6                | 200                       | urban                  |
| Mark                       | full primary<br>Years 1-8           | 250                       | regional               |
| Mary                       | primary<br>Years 1-6                | 50                        | rural                  |
| Timothy                    | full primary<br>Years 1-8           | 300                       | regional               |
| Suzanne                    | primary<br>Years 1-6                | 250                       | urban                  |
| Eliza                      | intermediate<br>school<br>Years 7-8 | 620                       | urban                  |
| Helen                      | full primary<br>Years 1-8           | 38                        | rural                  |
| Trina                      | Secondary<br>Years 7-12             | 400                       | regional               |

We acknowledge that it is difficult to reduce student voice approaches to one or

another category, as a range of approaches can fall into more than one area or might have multiple purposes and involve different processes. However, the indicative responses enable us to illustrate a range of purposes for student voice work in schooling contexts. As this is interview data, we cannot know the practices that are enacted in schools, only the ways that student voice was framed during the conversations between the lead researcher and each Principal. In the following section, we define and illustrate dimensions taken from the typologies – *Quality control*, *Students as informants*, *Compliance and control*, *Students as active respondents*, *Students as co-inquirers*, *Leadership and joint authorship*, and *Intergenerational learning*.

### *Quality control*

In a quality control approach, student voice serves as information to ensure that there is the provision of quality teaching. Quality control is a lynchpin of performativity (Ball, 2003). Student voice as a source of information addresses the purpose of ensuring institutional gains (Lodge 2005). The notion emerged in Fielding's (2001) early work when he asked: "Are we witnessing the emergence of something genuinely new, exciting and emancipatory that builds on rich traditions of democratic renewal and transformation?... Or are we presiding over the further entrenchment of existing assumptions and intentions using student or pupil voice as an additional mechanism of control?" (100). Students can be located as passive recipients of a service where they are asked to provide customer feedback (Clement 2015).

Marlene, the Principal of an urban primary school with a roll of just over 200, described to the researcher how she and her senior leadership team do not make appointments to visit classrooms in order to collect student voice, preferring to "just arrive". She observes that there is "a problem" with the teaching if students are unwilling or unable to articulate their progress and the teachers are held to account for their students explaining their progress. It is expected that the voice will align with the growth that the teachers report has been achieved to date. The students are surveyed and interviewed by the Principal or a member of senior management.

Sometimes, it could be a survey. We use Google Forms and Google Docs a lot... Sometimes, it can be us [senior management team] sitting down and talking with the children and asking them about their learning. (Marlene)

This notion of deploying a survey using etools depersonalises voice notwithstanding, it can be a useful broad brush to canvas opinion. In this schooling context it is triangulated alongside interviews to gather data on student perspectives. There are however potentially problematic power structures associated with this model where schooling management gathers student voice on teacher performance. The Principal (employer authority) or a nominee asks students questions to gain insight on the quality of a teacher's work. Students are asked to talk about their learning and progress by those responsible for school decision-making, including maintaining

discipline. Bragg (2007a), in her study on power relations embedded in United Kingdom student voice initiatives, recognises that teachers may be worried about how voice is used. She acknowledges that there are “difficult tensions and divisions” (516) with teachers positioned differently in relation to each other within school hierarchies, and issues that occur in the relationships between staff and students.

Some teachers could even be intimidated by older children; and pupils were certainly capable of resistance and hostility in some circumstances, as they had previously shown in disputes...—factors that might legitimately lead some teachers to fear the misuse of ‘voice’ (Bragg 2007a, 516)

Power asymmetries of schooling context can manifest in relations of domination between students and students, students and teachers and senior management and teachers (Mayes et al. 2017). Quality control processes can enfold all stakeholders into a system of audit.

Trina is a secondary Principal who describes student voice work as an aspirational goal. She characterises student voice work as a schoolwide process of checking with learners how they are finding the programs in the school.

We try to [use student voice] -try to increasingly, but it’s something we definitely need to do more of. Try to use it within our teaching and learning with, you know, quick little surveys on how the learning is going...We’re now just fully wireless and more in a position to set up [online] surveys and so we’re just sort of starting to learn how to do that... It’s actually asking them to be quite active in their learning - you’re trying to be explicit with what you’re trying to do and as you go you’re just checking. How is it for them? Just flipping the coin from ‘I am the teacher and this is what I teach’ to more ‘I am the learner, how is the learning going for me. (Trina)

An interview process, described by Trina, even more closely aligns with the notion of quality control. She points out that the data is gathered by senior management staff.

We also do it as part of our eight faculties or learning areas and we review them on a cyclical basis. Part of that review is how that learning is going for them in a particular learning area...We have a group - a committee, the Principal, the Deputy Principal and one of the Heads of Learning [who gather it]. So we do it that way. (Trina)

In both of these examples, student voice is gathered for the purpose of evaluation by those holding school leadership positions, and therefore has an audit aspect to it that is associated with quality assurance. This approach is illustrated in Figure 1. (Morgan 2011), a model of senior management data collection that involves a process which does not directly evoke teacher participation.

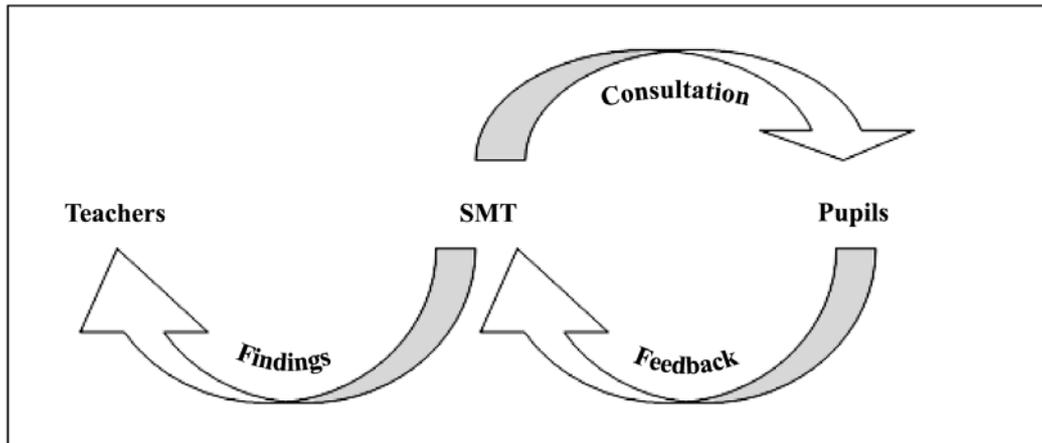


Figure 1. Model of pupil consultation – Senior Management Team consults pupils and relays findings to teachers (Morgan 2011, 459)

The classroom teachers in this model are the receivers of information gathered from student voice. In Morgan’s research into student consultation in a UK school, she found that there was a low prioritisation of student consultation by teachers and suggested that the fact that student voice was gathered on their behalf, as a quality control process, could have been an influential factor.

*Students as informants*

Young people can be positioned as sources of information that is used both to provide feedback to individual teachers and to serve purposes identified across the wider institution (Lodge 2008). Students as informants providing a data source is a common dimension across student voice typologies and is widely reported in research studies (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2015). The use of students as informants corresponds with Mitra’s (2004) conception of ‘listening - eliciting student perspectives as data’, Lodge’s (2005) ‘students as a source of information’ and Fielding’s (2012) ‘students as a data source.’ Their collective experiences are gathered through a predominantly passive process of class discussions, focus group interviews, individual interviews, or surveys.

Mark is Principal of a regional full-primary school. He describes how he publishes information gleaned from student voice data for the school community and while students are informants, the collation of voice is visible, albeit filtered at his discretion.

We do it formally, when we develop any initiative we get the feedback on us, as to what works, what didn’t work, what could be better?... Often, I’ll collate that and put it in the weekly newsletter and send that back to the parents - both the good and the bad [views]. (Mark)

Sarah is Principal of an urban primary school with students from 38 different ethnicities. Sarah describes how she ‘captures’ feedback for reporting and improvement purposes.

I seek student opinion when I report to the board on that particular curriculum area, with the help of different leaders of the staff teams. I seek student feedback. For instance, I had to do a presentation at the end of term 3 around the performing arts and so I captured student feedback around that and shared that with the board and with the staff. (Sarah)

Like the positioning associated with quality control, students have a passive role in this approach and are viewed as information providers, often for a reform purpose they may not know about. Thus, they may be unaware of the wider agenda associated with this voice collection, and with this information being used in a range of ways. This use can include appraisal, the targeting of professional development, the purchasing of resources, the redevelopment of curricula, or the development of school policy. Although they may provide feedback on the school system, this can be one-way process where students receive little if any feedback on the use of this voice data.

### *Compliance and control*

An emphasis on compliance and control can acknowledge the rights of the students to have involvement in decision making, however, their voices are used primarily to “serve institutional ends” (Lodge 2005, 133). In this approach the students might be used as a vehicle to convey the messages of adults (Lodge 2005). An example cited by Lodge is target setting, where both “students and teachers are constrained by the forms of target setting (filling in the paperwork) rather than engaging in conversations about learning (134).

Across the study we noted that some schools have shifted their terminology to learner agency as it implies a more active role for the learner. Nevertheless, despite this language change from voice to agency, with its a corresponding emphasis on decision-making, we infer that possible decisions are still within the tight parameters of what is permissible according to adult practitioner frameworks. Here the “the targets [still] come from the teacher” (Lodge 2005, 134).

Marlene uses student voice in relation to curriculum, to determine what the students want to pursue in their studies.

It can be giving them some choices - always remembering that the adults are responsible for the children's learning... So, we took the teacher strengths and we asked the children to opt into something that they would really, really like to pursue. For instance... the children are doing passion projects. Some are doing computer coding, some are doing visual arts, some are doing science and I think there's this type of student voice; a student voice - student choice, so that is what would I like to pursue and get better at. (Marlene)

Here the task is carefully determined, with parameters bounded by teacher capabilities, and the accessibility to choose does not impinge upon the teachers' ultimate responsibility for the taught curriculum.

Mary is Principal of a small, rural school. In the school the students are questioned about their experiences of learning in the class – both to see if they are clear about what and how they are learning but also the effectiveness of the planned lessons.

We have quite a lot of student voice in the year 5, 6 class - in not only what they learn, but how they're going to achieve it, what it is they're working towards, whether or not the way we're working or the way they're learning is effective for them. (Mary)

Voice does not just encompass accounts of learning articulated by the students for the purpose of exploring their understandings to enhance their capacity to learn. Mary alludes to voice as a form of surveillance where she checks the degree of student engagement through both observation and purposely listening to student peer dialogue.

We have a lot of conversations about how things are going for them. But I'd also define it as analysing their actions as well. If they're not engaging in something. To me, that's a huge piece of student voice because obviously it's not working. It is those conversations, but also paying attention to the students on a day-to-day basis. What is working and what isn't? And hearing those sideline conversations that the kids have amongst themselves to kind of gauge whether we're on the right track or what their next interest might be. (Mary)

Voice, here is coupled with surveillance for pedagogic purposes. There is the close monitoring of students' actions and peer conversations in order to ensure that the curriculum that is planned and operationalised is one that the learners are able to undertake and are interested in. When asked if she had noticed any tensions associated with student voice, Mary articulated a disjuncture between the formal government legislated curriculum, the taught and the learned.

Sometimes where the kids want to go and where possibly we should be going, according to the [New Zealand] Ministry [of Education] is a little bit different and sometimes because we've got multilevel classes in the school, sometimes the direction that some kids want to go in is quite different than the others because of their age. (Mary)

It is unclear here whether the students are constrained by the curriculum determinants or if the school enables the learners to engage in leadership (Mitra 2004) where they are “knowledge creators” or “joint authors” (Fielding 2012, 50). In these first three dimensions of voice work, the depth of student contribution is not apparent. The students may not be encouraged to consider themselves active in changing the course of their learning and having a direct influence on their circumstance. Student participation in learning is determined by adults, to meet a range purposes that are institutional and systemic.

#### *Students as active respondents*

The Principals made allusion to how, in their schools, students were invited to engage in dialogue to deepen learning and influence the professional decision-making. This

corresponds with Fielding's (2012) dimension where students are afforded positions as 'active respondents'. Timothy is a Principal of a regional full primary school. Like Marlene, he uses voice to examine whether there is alignment between what learning and, in particular, 'the cognitive engagement' that the students and teachers think has taken place.

I guess, it's just looking for the mismatch between what the teachers think the students are learning and maybe what actually is being received... We talk about the different curricula along the way and the learner's curriculum at the end point is the ultimate curriculum that's being learned... It's actually asking them 'how is this working for you, what do you enjoy?' So, a lot of our student voice is around enjoyment, engagement and schooling around behavioural engagement and we go "oh, that's nice, that's important" but at a deeper level we also look at some student voice around that cognitive engagement and – 'Is this actually working for you?' 'Is this accelerating your learning?' So, we've got a whole range of methods in which we've captured that over the years. (Timothy)

The 'active respondent' position differs from 'informant' as, although students are a data source, there is a degree of responsiveness to the students' comments. This is evident in the nature of Timothy's projected questions above. Timothy describes the 'capture' of voice, yet there is an implication that the feedback on cognitive engagement (pedagogic voice) directly influences teaching and learning in the classroom.

Suzanne is the Principal of an urban primary school. She describes how the practitioners in the school used an in-service day to set goals in order to promote a more pedagogic orientation to voice work in the school.

Well, allowing student opportunities to comment and contribute to and make decisions and share their views. When it came to student voice we got a bit locked down and some of the staff felt that it was just more around the student council and they wanted to move it away from this. That was why we changed our thinking... We had a day where we take stock of the year and then we sit - we reflect on the annual goals for the year and then we set goals for the following year. We talked about how we wanted them to be able to articulate and talk much more about their learning... I was really keen for it not to just be seen as just feedback, but talking about learning.... (Suzanne)

There is a prioritisation of pedagogic voice over intergenerational learning in Suzanne's school. The word "allowing" indicates that student participation is undertaken in accordance within specific adult terms of reference. Student councils can enable student participation in formal school decision-making, although as Thomson and Holdsworth (2003) point out, "it is here that more elitist forms of student leadership finds a place" (373). As more than "just feedback", Suzanne articulates an emphasis on student talk that has the potential to benefit student learning.

### *Students as co-inquirers*

The notion of dialogue is a significant feature of the active respondent position. As highlighted above, dialogue has been a key aspect in schooling and student voice work over the last few decades (Fielding 2012; Lodge 2005). In recent years there have been strong critiques of “speaking about and for others” (Cook-Sather 2014) and, in response, there has been an up swell of scholarship in the field where students have been positioned as co-inquirers (Fielding 2012), where they are collaborators and co-researchers (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2016; Nelson 2015). Student voice in a dialogic approach involves a more open, generative conversation and is based on a shared level of engagement where ideas are built upon. Pearce and Wood (2016) suggest the “goal the flattening of social relations”, escaping from “oppressive forces inherent to a hierarchically organised social order” and an “orient[ation towards action], make dialogue an “ideal starting point for transformative student voice.” (7).

Eliza is the Principal of a large urban intermediate school. She describes how student voice is used to elicit a range of perspectives, both pedagogical and pastoral.

Asking kids what they think they know, understand and having regular conversations with them about it. Taking feedback - who else is going to give us the most direct feedback about their issues, their concerns. Are they safe? What’s powerful for their learning? So all those questions are really, really important. (Eliza)

When students are located in schooling partnerships as co-inquirers, teachers usually take a lead role, with students active in their support (Fielding 2012). Helen is Principal in a rural school where children learn in two multi-level classrooms. The notion of dialogue in her comment below reflects Baroutsis, McGregor and Mills’ (2016) notion of ‘pedagogic voice’ where young people’s active engagement, participation and voice pertain to areas of teaching, learning and the curriculum.

It’s putting it in their terms and letting them expand it in their words rather than us telling them this is the wording.... Changing things to their own words gives them a better understanding of what it all means. It’s giving them a voice to sort of empower them to help with the development of these things, so that they can understand in their words. (Helen)

Although there is a co-inquiry approach alluded to here, where students can articulate and generate contributions (“help” with “development”), the notions of ‘giving voice’ and empowerment suggests a unidirectional flow of power with adults exerting control most, if not all, of the time. Empowerment as a concept has been well critiqued in the voice literature. Taylor and Robinson (2009) write that as power is not something that can simply be given away or shared, student empowerment can result in “reinscribing hegemonic power relations and reducing [the voice work] to tokenistic intervention” (166). The students described here are co-enquirers (Fielding 2012), with teaching staff taking a lead role in determining the focus of the talk and

possibly how the translation of wording takes place. However, there is a nod to intergenerational dialogic practice (Pearce and Wood 2016), as the students articulate in their own terms. However control over curriculum decision-making is not apparent in the statement and therefore it is unclear how much authentic power sharing would be possible – beyond translation.

#### *Leadership and joint authorship*

Students can demonstrate a degree of leadership (Mitra 2004), in which students and staff determine a course of action (Fielding 2012). Mark describes how older students are asked as a collective to make decisions about whole school activities. For instance, these students are asked if they want to be grouped in houses or according to their class groupings (hubs).

Anything we do within the school, we always ask the children how they feel about that. I mean basic things, like should we be doing a house competition or a hub competition. So, we ask them what their preference is. They get the opportunity to lead the rest of the school when we have cultural or sporting activities. They are encouraged to come up with the ideas, come up with the games, come up with the activities and then take the younger ones through it. So, they are given the responsibility to see whatever comes through. (Mark)

This is joint authorship (Fielding 2012) in the senior school, although it is unclear if younger students have an opportunity for decision-making, or even those who are “obnoxious” (Pearce and Wood 2016, 9). Mark describes practices that suggest participatory democracy and a shared commitment to the common good (Fielding 2001). Through dialogic engagement and leadership, students can be invited to take up leadership positions where they contribute to decision-making that enables their participation in the transformation of schools (Taylor 2016). This form of leadership in Mark’s school does not necessarily have the scope to affect school transformation. It is also unclear how much intergenerational learning (Pearce and Wood 2016) there is in the school when profoundly influential decisions about curriculum and the distribution of funds are undertaken.

#### *Intergenerational learning*

As highlighted above, intergenerational learning involves transformative practices. Pearce and Wood’s (2016) intergenerational component refuses the notion that children are naïve, irrational and do not understand their circumstances. Adults must acknowledge that young people are able to voice opinions and “their facilitation may not be needed at all, but... they may need to work closely with [them] to find a method of participation appropriate to their competencies” (Pearce and Wood 2016, 8).

Timothy describes ways that student voice operates within the school - ranging from a “tick boxy” approach to intergenerational learning where there is dialogue with the adults responsible for school governance.

We've done it [student voice] in a wide range of ways within our student council, interviewing students. Cohort groups present it to the board through their own voice and then [take] Q&A from our board members to the students without any sort of adult [teacher] input into it. There are anonymous Google surveys. Some of them are a sort of tick-boxy type approach... (Timothy).

In addition to interviews and surveys where students are 'informants', the students also have input into governance relationships where students convey their ideas to the school Board of Trustees. In Aotearoa/New Zealand there have been self-managing schools for almost three decades governed by Boards of Trustees. Therefore, these students were able to speak directly with the governing body who make the school policy and funding decisions.

The data suggests that all of the practitioners were interested to varying degrees in student input into the decision making in their schools. There was an emphasis on voice as a data source, the notion of quality control and dialogic practices associated with pedagogic voice. A discussion follows on the typology dimensions, with consideration given to the elements from the voice literature that are not explicitly mentioned by the school Principals.

## **Discussion**

In the last decade in Aotearoa/New Zealand there has been widespread take up of pedagogic voice pertaining to teaching, learning and curriculum concerns (Arnot and Reay 2007; Baroutsis, McGregor, and Mills 2016). The data highlights how voice work is used for a range of purposes. These purposes include: fostering students' connections with their schools as contributing members of organisations; intergenerational dialogue; opportunities for pedagogic reflection where learners consider their own learning processes; and political engagement as a "sense of agency" (Rudduck 2002, 127). Political voice work of this sort encourages students to become involved in school matters where they contribute to both the ethos of the school and approaches to teaching and learning (Charteris and Smardon 2018). Although these purposes have been separated and teased out for analysis in this article, they are not simplistically binarised. Rather, in practice, the narratives of democratic and transformational student voice overlap with voice work that aligns with policy and strategic initiatives (Hall 2017).

In an article that lodges concern about "the lack of student voice in strategic planning and school improvement", Bills and Giles (2016) make the observation that "students are best positioned to inform and critique the learning programs of a school" (165, 167). In the Aotearoa/New Zealand context, schooling audits are undertaken by The Education Review Office. Student voice is embedded in the performative quality control assurance process. A document on 'School Evaluation Indicators' specifically positions student voice as a "crucial source of information" and suggests gathering student voice as a useful process for educators and evaluators to undertake, when gathering data on student perspectives in regard to programs operating in schools (New Zealand Government 2016, 16).

It is important that evaluators and educators draw on rich sources of quantitative and qualitative data to inform their evaluations... Student voice is a crucial source of information about the quality and effectiveness of the learning opportunities provided by the school or an individual teacher. Students' insights and perspectives are an important tool for supporting evaluative thinking and determining priorities for action. New Zealand Government 2016, 16).

In this high stakes evaluation process, school performance evaluated by The Education Review Office is published in print and online media. It can evoke 'blame and shame' for schools in their communities where reviews are not positive and, we argue voice when used as an "indicator" becomes strongly coupled with processes of accountability (Keddie 2015) and performativity (Keddie 2016; Pearce and Wood 2016). Voice work, especially where it is gathered by school senior management or external evaluators, can become well removed from students' contexts. While it might be used to make judgments, this use of voice does not locate students as knowledge creators, joint authors or engage them in democratic intergenerational learning (Fielding 2012). Rather this "ventriloquism" of voice, where student quotations are used instrumentally and are divorced from context, merely affirms "an official and pre-existing position" (Bragg and Manchester 2012, 146) and instigates a binary of acceptable or not. That said, we also acknowledge that school administrators who take these approaches are often doing so in the interests of inclusion, taking action with empowering intentions. While there can be an issue with "ventriloquism" per se, the data collected may well lead to enhanced programs and practices within schools. It is therefore important not to binarise voice work.

There was a strong focus on pedagogic voice in the data that suggests school leader interest in curricula that is "relevant and that connects to young lives" (Smyth 2006, 282). Less was said about the promotion of "flexible pedagogy that understands the complexity of students' lives... regardless of their problems or where they come from" (Smyth 2006, 282). Across the research there was little comment made by the Principals in respect to voice work evoking participation of Māori (indigenous peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand). Berryman and Lawrence (2017) write that to be minoritised one only needs "to be treated as if one's position and perspectives are of less worth so that their indigenous student voice is belittled, silenced or marginalized" (336).

Minoritised students may well experience structural violence in schools. Structural violence can involve oppression and discrimination through stereotyping and although very difficult to detect, reflects "systematic patterns of acts directed towards certain groups in society in ways that risk obstructing the lives of the members of these groups" (Edling 2015, 404). It is therefore pertinent in schooling that voice work aspires to "deep democracy" (Fielding 2012, 45) to ensure that all voices are heard with a view to widening participation. There were no particular comments made across the interviews about students whose voices and participation are more challenging to engage - those who are "aggressive, rude or obnoxious" (Pearce and

Wood 2016, 9). This does not mean that culturally responsive and inclusive practices were not present in the schools. They just did not emerge in the study.

It is appropriate for further work to be undertaken on what culturally responsive and inclusive voice practices are currently deployed in schools and how participatory methods can be used to engage students who may be reluctant or find participation more difficult (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008; Mayes 2016b). While Lodge (2005, 126) argues that “the dialogic model is especially rich and has the most to contribute to improvement, especially where the focus is on learning”, it is clear that students need to see action arising from their voice work, have opportunities to lead change initiatives in their own right, and undertake projects that serve the common good (Fielding 2012).

### **Limitations**

The wider study into teacher professional learning and assessment for learning may have influenced the way that the school leaders contextualised student voice in the interview. The non-generalisable nature of the study precludes us from making sweeping statements about approaches to student voice across Aotearoa/New Zealand as a whole. Further, the snapshot of articulated practice cannot be said to represent all voice approaches in the particular schools as there are likely to be other processes that were not mentioned by the Principals that may be seen as participatory approaches to voice. However the study does draw attention to the rationales that were tacit in the comments of the Principals at that point in time, evoking a conversation about the degree to which there is a commitment to “ideas of empowerment, liberation and collaboration” (Taylor and Robinson 2009, 164) in certain conceptions of student voice work. As the topic is about student voice, further research could involve students as co-researchers into the nature of voice work in schools. Additionally, we acknowledge that the research question that we posed to the Principals contributed to the way that they responded. The word ‘use’ implies a tool and as such frames the data collected.

Across the study there was little reference to student input into governance and policy decision-making, or support to speak back to the wider political milieu. The references to student voice above pertained to cultural and sporting activities, pedagogy and school improvement. Although there can be benefit in students developing metacognitive awareness through analysing their own learning, the absence of references to higher level decision-making in the Principal data, implied that there may have been limited opportunities provided for students. The voice work described in the interviews were not aligned with radical models of schooling, where students are party to a broad range of influential decisions that impact on school functioning and management (Baroutsis et al. 2016; Mills and McGregor 2014). A question that invited specific comment on learning, assessment, and governance processes could have yielded different information.

This research resonates with the work of Nelson (2015) who advocates for the rejection of a ‘one size fits all’ approach to student voice work. When teachers bring

“differing capacities and preconceptions about student voice, student/teacher roles, and possibilities for student influence to their student voice work”, there is much work to be done in supporting them “to learn from, and with their students as partners” (Nelson 2015, 297). Furthermore, it is desirable that practitioners are aware of the instrumentalism of voice strategies and critiques associated with their application as a device to govern students. “[T]he focus of inquiry [can] remain squarely on the student’s learning and behaviour in school rather than on processes of transformation involving adults and young people” (Mayes 2016a, 52). Such goals draw on a conception of education as a mode of making explicit social and political practice.

## **Conclusion**

Widely viewed as “oriented to action, participation and change” (Taylor and Robinson 2009, 163), student voice is replete with promises of democratic participatory practice, student leadership (Mitra 2004), dialogic interchange (Lodge 2005), and intergenerational learning (Fielding 2004; Pearce and Wood 2016). It is also a key tool deployed in quality control, used to support performativity, leverage teacher and leader accountability, and foster schooling improvement. In this article we have examined how Principals in Aotearoa /New Zealand locate voice in their schooling contexts, and how its use positions students in ways, ranging from passive data sources, to contributors in intergenerational learning. It must be noted that the definitions of voice in this article are heavily consultation-oriented and pedagogically focused. This is to be expected, given the research initiative and that schooling improvement is a core focus of many student voice projects in Aotearoa/ New Zealand schooling. We suggest that both nationally and internationally, there is scope for policy makers and educators to use the dimensions of student voice discussed in this paper in order to evaluate the degree to which various policies and procedures deployed enhance the status and positioning of students in learning and governance partnerships.

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