

# Building trust and empathy:

## student voice and teachers' professional development with technology

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### ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the importance of trust between pupils and teachers in student voice initiatives and how cultivating 'authentic' trust can lead to a heightened empathy between students and teachers. The research findings presented here stem from doctoral fieldwork carried out in an English secondary school. The study – known as the 'Teach a Teacher' project – involved Year 8 pupils (12- to 13-year-olds) providing professional development in information and communication technology (ICT) for their teachers. Data were gathered through observations of teachers and pupils working together, focus groups with pupils, and one-to-one interviews with the teachers involved. This article does not have the scope to explore the school environment or the climate and conditions needed to organise student–teacher partnerships or the role that school leadership

plays in supporting these. Rather this article seeks to identify how students as joint authors of 'emancipatory' practice were involved in providing their teachers with professional development with their computer skills and therefore actively involved in bringing about change (Fielding 2001, 2011). The findings presented in this article demonstrate that when pupils are entrusted by teachers to take charge of their professional learning, there is a transformation in teacher–pupil relationships. There was wide acceptance of the role reversal this involved, with teachers seeing it as a positive experience in terms of learning from their students. Pupils gained a new perspective and insight into what the job of teaching entails. In this way, the project led to feelings of understanding, empathy and respect from the pupils.

### KEYWORDS

STUDENT VOICE

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

TECHNOLOGY

PUPIL–TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

TRUST

EMPATHY

## INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this article, student voice can broadly be defined as the process of consulting with students to enter a dialogue which may concern teaching and learning or other matters pertaining to classroom policy and practice. In turn, this may result in 'agency' and a situation whereby pupils are in a position to make a contribution to the corporate well-being of their school (Rudduck 2005). Within the wide and ever-growing body of literature on voice, there is recognition that student voice manifests itself in schools, but at different levels. Most criticism of student voice comes from where it is considered to be 'tokenistic' – a term which frequently crops up in the literature on voice (Cook-Sather 2006; Taylor & Robinson 2009; Lewars 2010; Wisby 2011). Tokenism is a word often associated with the lip-service paid to student voice in response to government policy (Lodge 2005) or to the more mundane aspects of school life such as fixing the state of the toilets or the lunch queue (Deuchar 2009).

Hart (1992) provides a useful model of student voice which presents the spectrum of pupil activity. Hart's 'ladder of participation' (see Figure 1) includes the lower levels of Manipulation, Decoration and Tokenism. These three lower rungs on Hart's ladder distinguish themselves from what Fielding (2001) describes as the true embodiment of 'emancipatory' practice whereby students are involved in radical democratic initiatives and therefore actively directing and being responsible for change. The 'Teach a Teacher' project considered here was a transformative initiative of the kind Fielding (2001, 2011) describes, and thus aligns with the top rung of Hart's ladder because the pupils in the project initiated a situation in which they took charge of their teachers' professional learning with technology. In this case, this involved pupils working with teachers with low levels of ICT skill. Typically, this involved helping teachers with Microsoft Office applications such

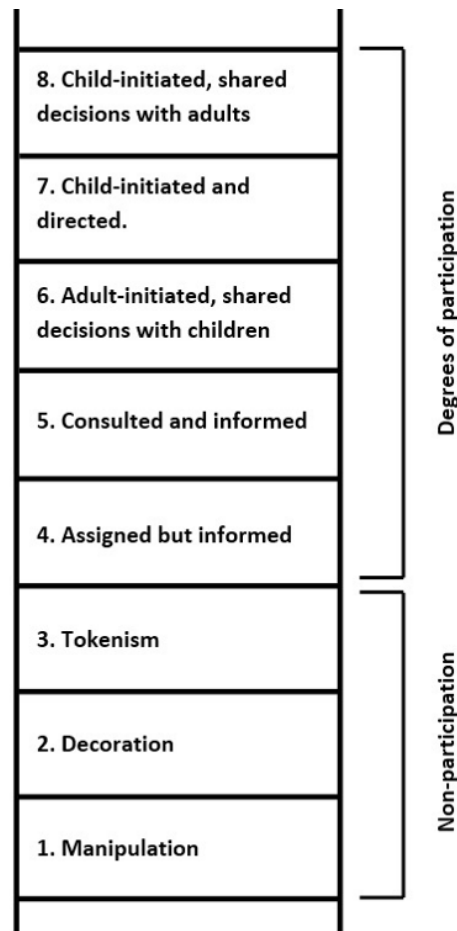


Figure 1: The ladder of participation – after Hart (1992).

as PowerPoint. In line with the eighth rung of Hart's ladder, this involved shared decisions where teachers negotiated with pupils what it was they wanted to learn, for example how to add hyperlinks within a presentation or editing video clips in Movie Maker.

Evidence of such a unique approach in marrying together a student voice initiative with teachers' professional development is something which is almost completely absent from the bodies of literature in these two areas. Where activity involving pupils providing ICT professional development for teachers is reported (Pachler et al. 2010; Anderson 2013; EdFutures 2017) there is a lot of positive adult praise for both pupils' personal attributes and the digital knowledge they pass on to teachers. In one case, the ICT leaders who organised the pupil-led training felt that 'the children had more impact on the practitioners' commitment to learning

about ICT than they did', with teachers reporting that it 'was amongst the most useful and challenging' training they had attended, and that the pupils were 'not only knowledgeable but inspirational' (Pachler et al. 2010: 73).

For such a student-led training initiative to be achievable and sustainable, or indeed for any form of student-teacher partnership or initiative to work – in relation to the upper rungs of Hart's ladder – then the quality of student-teacher relationships and the level of trust between pupils and teachers is vital (Czerniawski 2012).

## VOICE AND TRUST: STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

The concept of trust between teachers and pupils is not only a complex area, but one which is often contested due to the problem of defining trust in this context (Czerniawski & Garlick 2011). It is also pertinent to note here that trust may operate on two different levels: 'synthetic' trust may exist where student voice initiatives are tokenistic and driven by ulterior motives such as compliance or policy, as opposed to 'authentic' trust which is genuine and is derived from establishing professional and democratic partnerships between pupils and teachers (Czerniawski 2012). The capacity to build and sustain relationships between students and teachers, however, boils down to ensuring that the opinions of students are valued and that they are trusted (Waterhouse 2011). This in turn equates itself with what can be described as 'interpersonal trust' between teachers and pupils and is fundamental to unleashing the full potential of student voice where pupils are empowered in decision-making processes (Lizzio, Dempster & Neumann 2011). Along with increased responsibility and leadership roles, students constantly reiterate the importance of trust and the need for mutual respect (Mullis 2011).

What is significant here is the importance of generating an ongoing dialogue between students and teachers, as this can be seen to build shared narratives but in doing so requires both trust and honesty (Lodge 2005). Being able to trust a teacher opens up channels of communication which may not otherwise exist (Kjellin et al. 2010) and creates a culture of respect where they are not only listened to (Mullis 2011) but treated with both transparency and compassion (Czerniawski & Garlick 2011).

The next section considers how student voice is challenging in terms of how it may manifest itself and how its implementation in schools is essentially a complex affair because it creates a situation where both students and their teachers are involved in negotiating roles.

### STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

Pupil consultation and engagement where pupils and teachers take joint ownership of teaching and learning – such as the 'Teach a Teacher' project – is essentially challenging because it questions the established teacher-pupil balance of power (Rudduck 2005). At an institutional level this involves, at least culturally, a deeply engrained process of reform and a shift both in the identity of the stakeholders (Morgan 2011) and in the way the institution operates on a day-to-day basis with a view to pupils becoming involved in bringing about educational change and renewal (Fielding 2001). This entails a process which is mutually supportive and as well as fostering pupils' emotional and social development (Deuchar 2009), it also allows students to build empathy with their teachers (D'Andrea 2013; Gamliel and Hazan 2014).

To pretend, however, that student voice and the collaboration it involves between teachers and pupils is not political in nature – or indeed, politically driven – would be naive given that consulting with young people responds to both the needs of pupils and teachers (Demetriou

& Wilson 2010). However, this calls into question the potential role reversal that may follow because not only does it challenge any wider assumptions concerning the purpose of the education system, it also calls into question the nature of teacher and student identity and issues surrounding agency (Gunter & Thomson 2007). And this, after all, inherently entertains the belief that the 'dialogic' dimension to student voice is fundamental because it encompasses the idea that 'voice' is a social process and one in which those parties involved may come up with, and otherwise negotiate, shared meanings (Lodge 2005). In terms of the 'Teach a Teacher' project documented here, it is important – when considering this social process of negotiation – to briefly outline how those pupils and teachers were selected to take part.

### SELECTION OF THE PUPIL AND TEACHER PARTICIPANTS

Rather than pupils being chosen by myself or other staff in the school, it was agreed with my gatekeeper that the pupils would self-select and volunteer to participate in the research. Once the pupil cohort for the project was finalised they were asked to work in pairs and nominate the teacher that they wanted to work with. Once pupils had identified the teacher they wanted to work with, it was agreed that it would be best if pupils approached their chosen teacher in person. To help facilitate this process I produced an information sheet for them to share with their teacher, and although this seemed straightforward, as with the selection of pupils, events did not turn out as expected with the selection of staff (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). During the process of identifying and selecting 8 teachers, some 20 teachers were either approached or nominated by name. The pupil-teacher grid was therefore constantly changing as some teachers declined and others needed to be approached. After several months, the cohort of 24 participants (16 pupils and 8 teachers) was finalised. For the purpose

of clarity, pupils are referred to by their first name (eg John) and teachers by their title, (eg Ms Smith).

### THE RESEARCH TOOLS AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Data collection for this study was carried out in the following ways: Observations of pupils training their teachers were video-recorded so that I could see all three participants in each group (one teacher and two pupils) as well as the computer screen where they were working. The teacher interviews were audio-taped using a digital voice recorder which was positioned on the table between myself and the teacher. The focus groups were made up of four pupils of mixed gender, and these sessions were also audio-taped using a digital voice recorder.

The research question from the study which is relevant to this article is: In what ways might pupil-led professional development for teachers affect the relationships between pupils and teachers, and between the pupils themselves?

To answer this question, observation was my principal method of data collection because it is a non-interventionist strategy as the researcher does not interact with the subjects or seek to manipulate them or interfere in the situation (Alder & Alder, 1994). Carrying out observations of teachers also allowed me to see and record what people do rather than what they say they do. I chose to use individual interviews with teachers as a secondary method of gathering data because they allowed me to follow up and ask them



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about what they or the pupils said or did during the observations. By carrying out semi-structured interviews I could probe, follow up on answers, and by doing so reveal additional information and insights (Walsh 2001).

Focus groups, by definition, are inherently a form of interview (Williams 2003; Denscombe 2007), although their unique dynamic was suitable in this case because children tend to feel more supported and ready to express themselves when they are with their peers (McNeill & Chapman 2005). Pupil focus groups were perceived to be particularly useful because their organisation afforded the opportunity to have a gender balance and a mix of pupils in these groups who had taught different teachers and were able to come together and compare their experiences.

What was of value here was the fact that interviews can facilitate a mutual exchange which revolves around a topic of shared interest (Kvale 2008). In this way, the interview as a research tool was a powerful instrument (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011) because it afforded me the chance to exercise control over the situation that carrying out observations does not allow (Creswell 2005). Conducting interviews not only facilitated the collection of both factual and attitudinal data which were instrumental to understanding this study (McNeill & Chapman 2005), they also allowed me to frame specific questions which were geared towards providing answers to the research question under discussion here.

## FINDINGS

Through having subscribed to the project, pupils put themselves into a situation of responsibility where they knew that the traditional teacher–pupil model of instruction would be reversed. However, what they may not have been able to judge or anticipate was the way in which this experience changed their perception of their teachers and in particular how it enabled them to develop a sense of empathy with them. As Barry reflects:

*'When that teacher is teaching you, you think that what they do is just to teach, [that] they don't really do anything else. But then when you start actually teaching them [the teachers] you realise that they don't know everything and that they still want to learn other things.'*

Ms Keane provides additional insight into pupils' perceptions of their teachers when she affirms that the process of role reversal is a positive experience in encouraging pupils to empathise with them as people:

*'I think it [the project] has helped the relationship between teacher and pupil. Sometimes they do expect teachers to know everything and be perfect at everything, and I think it takes away that pedestal that sometimes teachers are put on. We're not perfect, we don't know everything, it's OK if we don't know everything, and I think they've benefited from that and becoming more confident in their own knowledge.'*

Not only does she reiterate Barry's realisation that teachers do not know everything, but she recognises how this has led to not just a deeper understanding of teachers as learners, but also pupils' self-assurance in their own knowledge.

Being open to reshaping the hierarchy of the school authority system is something which is seen to be especially beneficial for pupils. As Ms Sanderson comments, not only do pupils come to realise the challenges of teaching, it also gives them a degree of licence:

*'I think it's empowered them and also as I said, it's made them realise just the ins and outs of teaching, it's not as easy as just standing up there and waffling. You have to actually think [about] what you're doing.'*

This shift towards a more informal approach of teaching and learning is something that Ms Keane commented upon when she was asked if she felt her relationship had changed with the pupils

since being in the project:

*'Oh, definitely. I think that it's broken down the whole I'm a teacher, you're a student, and there's, like I was saying earlier, much more open dialogue especially between Lenny and Craig and myself. There's so much more, they feel much more able to put their point across. I've seen them become so much more vocal in the lessons because they know that they can talk to me outside of just a classroom setting. It's been really good.'*

What emerges from the teacher interviews is that those teachers in the project actively welcomed the process of role reversal and saw it as a positive experience. There was the perception that role reversal and handing 'control' over to the pupils were desirable outcomes, as Mr Harvey points out:

*'It's good experience for them to be able to be in a situation where they're in control of a teacher, an adult. How many kids are in charge of an adult? Very few. And I've never been threatened by that at all. I've always found that as useful, and they knew far more about computing than I did, so I thought they're ideal lads [to work with].'*

This situation of role reversal was seen by all teachers in the project as an enabler, whereas many teachers would see it as a threat as arguably it is a situation where the pupil gains control of a system which usually controls them (Taylor & Robinson 2009). Mr Harvey's comment about not feeling 'threatened' by the process of role reversal also leads on to the notion of there being genuine trust and potential for there to be empathy between teachers and pupils.

Above and beyond liking their teachers and accepting that they needed help with their digital skills, one feature noted in the pupil focus groups was the perceived shift in their relationship with their teacher as a result of the project. Pupils felt that their teacher 'connected' with them (Lenny);

that they had 'bridged a gap' between themselves and their teacher (Claire); that their relationship had become more informal rather than 'teacher-student' (Katie and Craig); and that they'd 'got closer' to their teacher (John and Frank). Pupils also reported how they conversed informally at school, for example with Craig noting that: 'Ms Keane can talk to us a lot more now. If she sees either one of us round school she'll quickly tell us what she's been doing on her own in her lessons.'

It is through this shift in relationships that pupils may begin to see the wider implications of teaching. Not just teaching itself, but the challenge their teacher faces of teaching students who may not be engaged, as Mr Maxwell illustrates:

*'I think mutual empathy is a key thing. I know that, not with these two young men who spoke to me, but I think in the grand scheme of things if this was a wider-run thing I think potentially behavioural issues that occur because of a lack of empathy, both maybe teacher and student and vice versa, this will maybe make them realise that actually it's not easy to teach somebody else, imagine doing it now in front of 30 other people with a quarter of them who maybe are not interested. So actually it'll allow them to see a different world from a teacher's point of view, and I think that would be a good thing.'*

As Mr Maxwell notes, the pupils involved in the project were not disengaged but the point about mutual empathy is a fundamental one. Not just in terms of how developing trust and empathy between pupils and teachers may overcome behavioural problems, but how enabling a process whereby pupils experience things from a teacher's perspective can lead to a deeper understanding and respect for each other (Giroux & McLaren, 1989).



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## CONCLUSION

There need to be established levels of 'authentic' trust already in place between pupils and teachers before student-led initiatives can become truly emancipatory. Any process which hands control over to the pupils needs to be mutually supportive and where and when this happens, there is potential to build empathy. With empathy comes agency and the power to form democratic partnerships which are not afraid to challenge or deconstruct the hierarchy of the school system. In the interest of bringing things together, it is important to try and understand why the 'Teach a Teacher' project was successful and to do this, it is necessary to consider the various components and factors involved.

The main conclusion to be drawn here is that despite a range of factors including teachers' low levels of confidence, weak ICT skills and lack of knowledge concerning the 'language' of digital technologies, they were all still motivated to engage and persevere with the project and to allow pupils to be in charge of their training. I also feel confident in concluding that if pupils were taken out of the equation, and the project had been run just by teachers working with other teachers, it might well have experienced a degree of success, but not nearly to

the same extent. Perhaps what made the project work beyond expectation was not just the bespoke and visionary nature of the provision, but the relationships that the teachers had with their pupils and the unique perspectives and sensitivities they could offer. What emerged from the data was a sense of inhibition, trust, openness and levels of shared commitment and empathy that teachers most likely would not have found, even with their peers.

On a parting note, it is worth remembering that in any school the student body accounts for 95% of the stakeholders (Roberts & Nash 2009), yet 'somehow educators have forgotten the important connection between teachers and students. We listen to outside experts to inform us, and, consequently overlook the treasure in our very own backyards' (Soo Hoo 1993: 389). ■

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