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### **‘But I listen to children anyway!’—teacher perspectives on pupil voice**

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# **‘But I listen to children anyway!’— teacher perspectives on pupil voice**

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This paper explores the perspectives of teachers who initially observed, and later came to participate in, a pupil voice initiative in a primary school. Such ‘marginal’ points of view are often neglected in discussions of youth participation. The article aims to demonstrate that whilst adult support for pupil voice is crucial in ensuring its success and sustainability, it is important to recognise the demands it places on teachers, for instance in changing their identities as professionals and their relations both with children and with other staff. Methodologically, it offers a case-study approach, drawing on research notes and data gathered during a two-year period in which a deputy head attempted to develop pupil voice in a primary school and focusing on her own account of how the other teachers responded to her work. It shows that, whilst children seemed to rise quickly to the challenge of pupil voice ways of working and being, the perceptions, experiences and reactions of the teachers tell a more ambiguous story of the complexities that emerge as intentions are implemented. At the same time, the article offers insights into how pupil voice can be implemented in ways that help achieve positive outcomes for all involved.

**Keywords:** *Pupil voice; Participation; Primary school; Professional identity*

Without the wholehearted adult support for, and belief in, the potential of Student Voice, we believe the role and contribution of students to their learning communities cannot be fully realised. (Martin *et al.*, 2005)

## **Introduction**

This article explores the responses of teachers in a primary school who first witnessed, and later came to participate in, a deputy head’s attempt to develop pupil voice in their school. The work with children produced a relatively straightforward narrative of progress and success, which we have explored elsewhere (Fielding & Bragg, 2003;

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Bragg, 2007). However, the perceptions, experiences and reactions of the other teachers tell a more ambiguous story of the complexities that emerge as intentions are implemented—and for this reason it is all the more important that it is heard. As Martin *et al.* note in the quotation that prefaces this paper, adult belief in student voice is essential to realise its potential. At the same time, it is important to recognise and even validate the reservations that teachers might have about ‘voice’ initiatives. It is simplistic, as sometimes happens, to condemn such teachers as motivated by a conservative reluctance to give up their own power. Instead, this article argues that their concerns have more complex roots, since change involves questions of professional identity and purpose, and of teacher voice as well as student voice. At the same time, the fact that the research reported here led ultimately to a positive outcome means that it can indicate constructive directions to take as adults and young people learn to work together.

### Methodology

The data presented here was gathered during research conducted as part of a Teaching and Learning Research Programme Network on *Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning* (2001–3), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Taking the view that ‘schools have changed less in the last 20 years than young people have’, the overall aims of the network of ‘consulting’ projects were to explore more participative models of education, and specifically to: identify strategies that help teachers consult pupils about teaching and learning; gather evidence of the power of pupils’ comments to improve teaching and learning; gather evidence of the impact of consultation on pupils, teachers and schools; and develop ways of building consultation into the organisational structure of schools. The school discussed here was part of two projects directed by Michael Fielding at the University of Sussex and on which I was the researcher.

One project, on ‘starting and sustaining the process’, aimed to document issues encountered at various stages of attempting to incorporate and institutionalise a commitment to pupil participation, and drew on evidence provided by schools across the network. The second explored the potential of working with pupils to research their own teaching and learning. Both projects built on previous knowledge and frameworks developed by the network research team. Schools joined on the basis of willingness or interest, so already broadly shared the projects’ perspectives. The ‘distributed’ research model adopted was one where the action research initiatives were largely shaped by the teachers in their own work contexts. Some teachers acted as both key informants and co-researchers, gathering data which they made available to us, but which they also used for their own purposes (such as M.Ed. qualifications or Advanced Teacher Status). The external academics supported the teachers’ work, providing a sounding-board, and other perspectives where requested, whilst generating their own data that they could share with the teachers. Thus, the project director and researcher visited schools at least once, observed events, conducted interviews with various actors in the process, collected documentation and occasionally provided

specific training, events or workshops for individual schools. During the 18 months of the project the research team organised two conferences where teachers and students from participating schools came together and shared their work, the academics discussed their own findings and analysis to date, and all participants collectively reflected on future directions. The teacher-researchers were able to share the outcomes with their colleagues as they saw fit. Thus the identification of key issues here derives from the dialogue with teachers and students that underpinned the whole research process, although the responsibility for analysis and commentary in this case ultimately remains with the external researchers.

In the case study on which this paper focuses, we worked with Alison Peacock, who was then teacher and deputy head of her primary school. She has developed her own accounts of her work (Peacock, 2001, 2005, 2006). Although Sara Bragg is credited as the author of this article, it depends throughout on the extensive contributions and the intellectual and moral framework provided by Michael Fielding during both the research and the writing process. The collective 'we' used here attempts to do some justice to his influence and support. It also incorporates the powerful role played by Alison Peacock, in her practice—to which we hope to have done credit by writing the article around it—and in her willingness to participate extensively in the research. Note that all other names here are pseudonyms.

Over a two-year process, Alison worked towards involving pupils not only by consulting them about extracurricular matters such as the school environment, but also by considering their views in curricular areas and giving them control over their own learning processes. We have collected together the emails, conversations and formal interviews we exchanged with Alison over this period. Her account is particularly rich because she stayed in close and regular contact with us, describing events as they unfolded. As others have argued, creating narratives can be an effective mode of reflective practice and a tool for understanding (Bolton, 2006). Here, we focus on how teachers responded to Alison's work. Although teachers' own voices are only refracted through Alison's, the contemporaneous way they were gathered means that they have an immediacy and may reflect some of the dilemmas of pupil voice work better than a retrospective narrative in which difficulties tend to be smoothed over, or formal interviews in which teachers respond to a researcher they see as an advocate of pupil voice. Thus the voices encountered here pose genuine challenges and allow us to focus on details of practice that can make a difference to the experience, outcomes and success of student involvement.

## **Background**

The school concerned was a Junior, Middle and Infants (JMI) School in Hertfordshire (a county north of London). It is of average size, with at the time of the research about 315 pupils aged between 5 and 11, twelve qualified full-time teachers and eleven support staff. The intake of children was quite mixed, but on the whole the school was in a broadly middle-class area, with a supportive parent body and good links with the local community such as local businesses. The profile of the school was in line with

the national average in terms of free school meals and special educational needs (usually taken as an indicator of poverty levels).

After four years of teaching there, Alison had become deputy head a few months before she began the work described below. The head supported Alison's work throughout, but did not play an active role within it. The school's pedagogical history under its longstanding head was that it had an open-plan structure and a tradition of child-centred pedagogy, such as circle time, and an overt commitment to the values of play and listening to children. Within this, however, individual teachers had autonomy and the values they held varied quite widely. Some believed in ranking or ability grouping, with the result, in Alison's view, of setting children within a class against one another and creating an atmosphere of hostility and competition.

The school culture also fell short of its rhetoric of teamwork and aiming to value all members of staff. Some staff did not feel appreciated or recognised. When Alison arrived at the school, she observed that there would be separate Christmas lunches for teachers and support staff, which ran counter to its avowed belief in equality amongst them. There were further divisions between the teachers of the younger Key Stage 1 pupils (KS1, aged 4–7) and of the Key Stage 2 (KS2, aged 8–11) children, with the former even finding the older pupils intimidating. Such issues immediately raise the question of how far teachers' own voices had been respected or considered, a question that needs to be addressed at a systemic level within education.

### **Pupil voice at the classroom level**

An earlier occurrence, before our research period began, reveals how pupil voice initiatives involving even just one teacher can affect others—and indeed demonstrate the limits of working within a single classroom rather than at whole-school level. Alison was already committed to working within her own class (a Year 5, 8- to 9-year-old group) in ways that refused to label children according to deterministic notions of ability. As an example of her mixed-ability but learning-focused approach, she had instituted 'independent time' with her group, starting each morning with a half hour in which students chose their own activity. Children valued this highly and when encouraged to justify the learning it involved, they articulated powerful arguments, such as 'It clears my head', 'I'm ready for learning', 'I want to get up in the morning because I know that I'm coming to school to carry on with my project'. By asking them to be explicit about the benefits of this unstructured time, Alison aimed to help her students become reflective learners.

However, Alison's pupils became used to her flexible approach and when they moved up into the next year, reacted badly against the more formal and structured methods used by their new class teacher, Julia. This left all those involved upset and angry and, in Julia's case, demoralised. Alison's pedagogy had the effect of constructing Julia's as a 'problem' or even as incompetent, in a way that would probably not otherwise have arisen. Whilst Julia was not in principle hostile to what Alison was doing, she did not have the grounding in such ways of working that would make it possible for her easily to adapt her own approach.

### **Pupil voice across the school—who speaks? Who listens and how?**

At the point where our research began, Alison wanted to extend to the whole school the kinds of approaches she had been using with her class. She began 'pupil voice' assemblies in the autumn term. Here, she worked (mainly alone) with 120 children aged between 8 and 11 (at KS2) in the school hall, to discuss their perceptions of the school and how they could work together to make changes. She described it as being 'as interactive as possible, very much discussion-based, very participative'. For instance, she would use 'buzz groups' or ask pupils to move around the hall to different corners to vote on statements or ideas—techniques that meant that all children could express views, even if not verbally. These led to two obvious changes in the school: establishing a new tuck shop for morning breaktime (children complained that they often became too hungry to concentrate on their work by late morning) and a 'suggestions box' in the dining room where children could write about any concerns and know that a teacher would help sort them out. Children designed and decorated this, and then introduced and explained it to other children—and it was never abused. The box clearly built on an existing trust between staff and students, as the children had to believe that their concerns would be taken seriously and acted on; though we might note that at this stage their roles were traditional (teachers as protectors and caregivers to children, and children as relatively passive in terms of finding solutions to problems).

At the beginning of this work, Alison held a staff meeting to talk about student voice and her plans for the assemblies. She reported: 'Everybody was unanimous that we ought to be listening to the children. One teacher said, "but I listen to children all the time anyway!". I said "so do I, but I don't know what children across the whole school are thinking"... It felt that the impetus is coming from me and everybody else is going along with it partly to please me, partly because it seems that I will be doing the bulk of the work anyway. But at least I've got their blessing and they know what I'm aiming for'.

Corson has argued that 'For (new) values to count they need to be ... articulated sincerely by significant figures in the organisation so that they become part of the taken-for-grantedness of the place' (Corson, 1992, p. 249). We see here an attempt by Alison to be an 'intellectual champion' of an initiative, to articulate a clear rationale for student voice work, engage in debate and discussion about what underpins a new way of working and argue with conviction about the 'why' and not just the 'how'. This kind of support gives a development status and raises its profile, especially when it is a new venture. In principle also, Alison was taking an organic, patient approach, starting from teachers' willingness to work in new ways and providing the resources that turn such 'openings' into 'opportunities' to achieve this in practice (cf. Shier, 2001).

However, the power dynamics are complex; she is in a position of seniority, and might have had a certain intellectual weight through her M.Ed. qualification and links with universities, which in turn might have made it difficult for her colleagues to challenge her. (Teachers' professional autonomy has been generally undermined in recent years [Day & Hadfield, 2004]; gender ideologies and history combine to undermine



the intellectual confidence of many primary teachers [Walkerdine, 1990]; and Alison may have further intimidated them by distributing an article by Michael Fielding that was aimed at an academic audience.) This raises issues of how one might listen to and take into consideration the 'voices' of those who have doubts about a project, including students and parents as well as other staff. Rather than combining to make a coherent whole, such voices frequently clash—as when, for instance, parents object to students' views on abandoning uniforms or assemblies, or see participation projects as a distraction from assessed schoolwork. Deciding whose voices are to count is an ethical and highly charged political matter.

The response of the teacher who argues that she already listens to children, whilst not constituting overt resistance, raises interesting issues. Many primary school teachers' identity is founded on concepts from child-centred or progressive pedagogies in which they see themselves as deeply engaged in children's worlds (Walkerdine, 1981). This is very different, however, from the kind of listening that Alison wanted to encourage, where in effect, the kinds of questions to be asked, and the range of 'voices' children can use, shifts significantly; from working on children's behalf to working with and alongside them, for instance. This means that what Alison was asking involves not only a minor change in pedagogical practice (which might be easily absorbed), but also a 'paradigm shift' in teachers' very identity, which might be highly problematic and disturbing. Teachers may feel that their existing practice is being criticised and redefined as lacking, with no clear 'new' identity yet apparent.

During this first autumn term, Alison gave teachers some handouts about *Giving Children a Voice* to discuss in circle time and to feed into the pupil voice assemblies. They were designed to offer a structure for teachers in their own classrooms, and contained questions she had written, such as: 'If you could change something about the school, what would it be?', 'How would you let someone know if you were being bullied?' and 'Do you think teachers should ask children what they think about school? Why?'. She found she got unsatisfactory answers, in that they seemed too superficial or unconstructive: 'things like, "It's too noisy in our class because the radiator makes a noise", and, "We don't like always having to do English and Maths in the mornings, why can't we do it in the afternoon?"'. Teachers may have been disappointed by such responses, and, lacking the skills to develop them further, have been reaffirmed in their doubts about this process. Alison also remarked, 'But then what actually happened as a result of it? I don't feel the teachers themselves have much ownership over this at all'. Even in relation to the suggestions box, she observed: 'I worry that I am leading it far too much—all the comments are addressed to me or the head'.

At this stage, however, she was engaged in a delicate balancing act between wanting to lead the process so that it would be successful with pupils, based on her greater expertise, and wanting to involve teachers. Indeed, teachers perhaps had to come second, in that too much involvement might inhibit children's responses. She remarked that 'staff do come into the assemblies to see what we are doing, but the KS1 teachers in particular seem suspicious and to feel excluded. And anyway, if the children have all their class teachers sitting round the edge, how genuine a debate is that actually going to be?'. There are obvious paradoxes here, between leading and

inviting others to collaborate. At this stage, Alison suggests that top-down leadership is necessary to promote participation and engagement by children, and that teachers may need to be excluded in order that children are included.

### **Developing a collective focus—the importance of joint projects**

The pupil voice assemblies soon identified a further concern: the playground. Fortunately, this coincided with the school management's own plans to improve it. Alison acknowledged the need to engage initially with pupils about those areas they claim or consider to be their own territory (playgrounds, breaktimes, toilets) rather than those prescribed by teachers. The school (through the Parent-Teachers' Association) demonstrated its willingness to give children a high degree of autonomy in these matters by giving them a budget for equipment that was under pupils' control. This was a concrete mark of trust indicating genuine sharing of responsibility and power in decision-making. The children wrote to local businesses and garden centres to seek support. They designed the playground with a landscape gardener who came in voluntarily to work with them.

Alison reported to us that:

Playground Day was a huge success. It involved absolutely everyone—parents, grandparents, local industry, governors, all the children, all the staff. Children acted as reporters and created newspaper front pages ... [The playground] includes a water feature, and I would say that all the kids think that it is the most marvellous symbol of what they can do by working together. They are so proud of it. I think they are beginning to see that this student voice works, it's real.

The Playground Day, therefore, did offer a means to reach out across the whole school community. A further example of this was that catering staff at the school produced special 'take-out' burger meals, which children had suggested would be their preferred option for lunch that day. These were immensely popular, which was gratifying for the staff, whilst also maintaining a focus on pupil voice and the benefits of cooperation.

That same month, Alison, staff and pupils attended a conference on pupil voice (organised as part of the larger research project) at which they were able to present their playground work. It gave Alison a chance to connect others to the wider issues and networks, and all of them a way to celebrate their achievements. Alison was careful to include as many people as she could, across the school community—she attended with the head, their road safety ('lollipop') lady and a governor, plus six children. They came back enthused about the ideas shared there. No other school in our network brought such a range of adults to our events, although questions of resourcing might be as significant as political will.

In May, Alison reported two new developments. In the first, she involved the children in setting five targets for the school development plan (which all schools were required to produce). 'Their first target was "more responsibility for our own learning". OK then!' In the process, a task often seen as an administrative or managerial headache, carried out only to satisfy external requirements, became enlivened and



meaningful. Alison observed that ‘children do seem to be getting a sense that they can speak for the school, “we at this school think this”, and that’s very powerful. It means that they’re thinking, “it’s not just what we do in our classroom, we can affect change throughout the whole school”. I’m seeing a school-wide impetus about things, which is thrilling really’.

Nonetheless, Alison did meet some explicit challenges from other teachers about student voice, reporting: ‘Julia has been challenging me about pupil voice. She says “They know what to say in theory, but in practice they don’t carry it out”. The children are good at coming up with all the answers for an article or a debate, they know that they should be working together as a team, but, then why is it that Danny’s just pulled the chair out from underneath Oliver and he’s fallen on the floor...’. Alison had similar doubts herself over the mismatch between the high ideals voiced by the children, and everyday school experience, which was inevitably far from perfect, full of contradictory behaviours and emotional intensity.

Subsequently, the school was advertising for a new Year 4 teacher, so she talked to children (aged 7–8) in that class about what kind of a teacher they wanted. Alison explained that: ‘Initially I get all the standard answers, “somebody with a sense of humour, kind and pretty”, it’s like they want a Mary Poppins!’. Although schools do increasingly use student interviewers as part of their appointment process, some adults’ reservations about student voice have to do with getting precisely these kind of responses. They fear that students will make unrealistic requests or judgements, without thinking through their consequences or meaning. As a result, teachers may resist voice, or take the easier option of training up outstanding but acquiescent pupils.

Alison’s determination to develop a more collective and democratic approach was shown in her response to the children:

So I took it a step further and then asked what interview questions they thought we should put, to give them a different way in. Then they role-played being the different teachers and we tried out some of the interview questions that they’d come up with, and the sort of answers that they might give, and asked “which teacher out of these would you want and which wouldn’t you want?” I think it is about giving them the right kind of forum in which to express their ideas, because they genuinely do know. And children have everything to teach us because they’re the ones that are evaluating what we’re doing all the time.

That is, she demonstrates that the success of pupil voice depends on structuring the processes by which meaningful contributions can be obtained from all, and finding techniques to build successfully on what children do implicitly know.

### **Pupil voice: speaking back?**

Subsequently, by contrast, Alison hit an even more problematic ‘low’, emailing us to say: ‘Hit a snag today. One of the staff was upset because she received a report card on her performance as a teacher from one of her pupils—complete with targets! She was affronted and felt that this pupil voice thing was turning things on their head’.

When encouraging pupil participation, particularly on teaching and learning issues, teachers who have not experienced this way of working before often voice genuine

anxieties and concerns. They may be sceptical about young people's knowledge, intentions or capabilities, especially where they do not have a particularly positive relationship with them. They may feel that children are not competent to offer comments on their work, that they may not keep confidentiality, that they don't have the specialist knowledge necessary, or that it gives a platform to the 'wrong' students. They may be suspicious about what will happen to the data that students collect if they carry out formal research. Some argue that students do not fully understand the complexities of the context or the system in which they operate. All these need to be acknowledged. Negative outcomes are less likely where students are supported in their work and enabled to understand the broader context of their activities, and where issues of values and ethics are addressed early on and returned to throughout the process.

In the case of the 'report card', it is hard to ascertain how far the pupil was purposely malicious. He was 'citing' words and we cannot tell precisely what effect he intended them to have. Having seen what he wrote, it seemed to us that it could equally well have been affectionate. However, this indicates profound challenges about pupil voice work, who gets to evaluate whom and how. Teachers are used to being put in the position of evaluating children; thinking that pupils might evaluate teachers in turn effects shifts in identity and power. How differently would teachers write reports on students if they were also to be evaluated? Would it inhibit professional judgement, or promote new professional relationships? How far can the agenda be kept to common, collegial goals rather than individualistic, divisive ones (Fielding, 1999)?

We have been repeatedly struck by how readily some students take to the idea of voice, and how familiar they already are with the discourses of educational management. When pupils set 'targets' for the school, they included the idea of 'taking responsibility' for their learning, which is precisely that being promoted in current British education policy. In the case of the report card, too, a child demonstrates familiarity with the language of performativity. There is a common perception that such official discourses, although they are *about* children, do not *involve* them and indeed go over their heads; these examples show what a fundamental misunderstanding this is. It also reveals how 'pupil voice' is shaped (spoken by) the broader discursive contexts that are available, which are often those of an individualised and competitive model of education (cf. Thomson & Gunter, 2006). Alison's achievement was partly to give pupils access to other discourses of mutuality, care and cooperation. These could be shown in other instances—for instance, at the start of the following academic year, Year 6 students prepared an assembly for the whole school, with a message about their buddy system. Alison explained that 'they have established a new "friendship stop" on the playground where children can go if they are feeling sad or lonely. They sang "We're the Buddies" to the tune of "Bob the Builder" [a popular children's TV programme] and added really good lyrics (apparently the six-year-olds were singing it on the way to swimming the following Monday)...'. Careful work is needed to ensure that these more positive outcomes are brought to the fore.

### Building 'community'

In the summer term, Alison found a practical but highly symbolic way to demonstrate what a commitment to working as a whole school 'community' might mean in practice. The school was given a School Achievement Award (a few thousand pounds recognising improved test results). Alison insisted on dividing it up on a pro-rata basis for all staff, including the janitor, classroom assistants and 'lollipop lady' (road safety officer). Whilst the latter told her it was 'wonderful' to feel so included, some teachers objected: 'one was absolutely outraged that the caretaker, for example, should be getting a sum of money. "What had he done to get those kids through their SATs?" He'd done absolutely nothing as far as she was concerned. But I think it's about building a whole school community. If teachers aren't prepared to respect and learn from someone with fewer qualifications or years of experience than them, how will they listen to children?'. Alison's choice here was powerful and profound, effectively challenging deep and strongly held assumptions about adults' roles and identities and about who is worth acknowledging.

In the second year, Alison began work on what was then a new government initiative, 'Healthy Schools', discussing in the pupil voice assembly what makes a healthy school. Alison, in line with her views on the impact of the curriculum on students' sense of well-being, turned this exercise into a major investigation into 'what makes a "decent teacher" as pupils put it!'. Children came up with categories they saw as being the main qualities of a good teacher, and then voted for those they most agreed with. Alison's class collated the data and put them onto an Excel graph (again, highlighting the link to learning), and then they all fed back to the staff and to the other children in the school. One might anticipate that teachers would fear this kind of research. However, the main findings were that 'the quality that the children thought was most important was that the teachers trusted *them*, and second, that they could trust the teacher. That whole issue of trust is absolutely crucial'. Through such means, teachers' fears about pupil voice could be lessened, and mutuality developed.

### Involving others in the process

Just before the end of the autumn term of the second year of this process, Alison took six children and four staff to the second conference on student voice organised as part of the wider research project. Once again, she brought a range of staff, including a governor. It proved to be a turning point. By January, she reported: 'Brilliant results from the conference. It inspired Jane [a Year 2 teacher] to propose weekly whole-school mixed-age pupil voice circle meetings. We discussed it at our INSET [training day], and amazingly, all staff agreed to give them 15 minutes a week'. Alison had found the right ally in Jane, who as a teacher of the younger pupils helped to bridge the gap between KS1 and KS2 teachers. The fact that the initiative came from someone other than Alison might also have made it more acceptable.

Alison described the meetings as follows:

All children aged 4–11 take part and teaching staff lead the circles. Every teacher has about 25 children from all age ranges and we have a whole-school agenda. Year 6 children take notes from each circle and these are collated by my class or me and fed back the following week as minutes and new agenda items. So teachers who are less confident about working in this way have a safe set of boundaries, they know what they will be doing. Support staff join the circle meetings too and the staff leading each circle will change every fortnight so that all staff will get to work with all children. We wanted children to get to know all the adults in the building and see that we all want to hear what they have to say. Plus it gets over hierarchies—like the fact that KS1 teachers don't know the older children as individuals and can find them daunting. I am delighted because the emphasis has now shifted away from me but I am able to 'co ordinate' and 'facilitate'.

This method of consulting the whole school community developed grew quickly. Two governors joined in circle time, to get to know the school better, and the Year 5 children began to help take the minutes, so that they would be skilled up by the following year. And Year 6, not the teachers, ran the sessions. Alison reported: 'the younger children speak more now than they ever have done before because it's their peers that are leading it, and they look up so much to Year 6'. Crucially, from the point of view of this article, she also remarked that 'staff—even the ones who have been suspicious of pupil voice in the past—find children very mature and are constantly surprised by them. The most thrilling part for me is that all teaching and support staff are now actively involved—something that has taken two years to develop'.

When, some time later, Alison announced that she was leaving to take up a headship, Julia, the teacher who was initially most resistant to the work, proved to be the one who declared that 'pupil voice must continue', which Alison rightly saw as a wonderful affirmation. Staff who were most keen to continue pupil voice activities were galvanised by Julia after Alison's departure—an outcome that would have seemed impossible when Alison began her work.

## Conclusion

Pupil voice in the case discussed here meant an extensive involvement of children at all levels of the education process. Whilst the change process began by consulting them about extracurricular matters such as the school environment, it went on to achieve Alison's ultimate goal of developing pupil participation in aspects of the curriculum, the running of the school (such as selection of teachers), and gaining control over their own learning processes. We should not underestimate the complexities of pupil voice, which this article hopes to have illuminated more fully through its detailed narrative account. Firstly, for instance, at the outset we noted that the school subscribed to a philosophy of child-centred pedagogy and that as a result most teachers were in principle not overtly hostile to the concept of pupil voice. However, child-centredness in practice often involved a closeness to and empathy with young people that led teachers to believe they already knew their views and could represent them themselves. It also meant that teachers constructed professional identities as caregivers and protectors of children, whom they saw as vulnerable and even passive. These

identities and beliefs were fundamentally challenged by the requirement to listen in a different way (alongside, rather than on behalf of, children) and on a far wider range of issues.

Secondly, schools should not be idealised as harmonious learning communities: this school had its own underlying and difficult tensions and divisions, for instance between staff positioned differently in the school hierarchy, and between staff and pupils. 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 with a year teacher—factors that might legitimately lead some teachers to fear the misuse of ‘voice’.

The change process may have succeeded in part because it was invitational rather than a directive, managerial model, offering scaffolded examples and attending carefully to the personal dimension. Alison managed the process carefully in order to support teachers as well as pupils, involving them as ‘legitimate peripheral participants’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) until they felt ready to take on new roles. For instance, she supplied teachers with the questions that they could use to discuss pupil voice with children before they felt able to make appropriate proposals themselves. She involved others in the process by taking them to events. Teachers initially modelled how to conduct the pupil voice circle meetings, but were given an agenda so that they too were guided in what to do. Only after children observed this for some time did they begin to lead the meetings.

In addition, the work described here was able to balance losses and gains in a way that may have made it more acceptable. For instance, if teachers’ ‘old’ identity as caregiver was difficult to give up, it was compensated for by gaining more confidence and mutuality with pupils across the age range in the circle time meetings, where pupils were encouraged to develop a voice that was constructive and cooperative rather than critical. Likewise, if some teachers felt their work was belittled when Alison recognised all staff’s contribution to their School Achievement Award, by doing so Alison greatly encouraged ancillary staff, whose voices were accordingly strengthened.

A final point concerns the significance of ‘teacher voice’ or, more accurately, the voices of all those in a learning community, including support staff. Alison has commented that teacher voice ‘has to be developed alongside pupil voice for the dialogue to be truly meaningful within a whole-school situation’. The suppression of teacher voice is a wider issue: teachers’ role in professional and curriculum development matters has been consistently sidelined in government policy in the last 25 years. Despite recent enhancements to teacher status and pay, the teaching profession remains an uncertain and relatively uncritical one. There are clearly contradictions in insisting on listening to pupil voice when teacher voice has been undermined. Even in this case study, there are contradictions and ambiguities. It may, for instance, initially have seemed easier for Alison as the advocate of pupil voice to address children’s varied concerns than those of some of her colleagues. Despite her openness to other perspectives, she had to maintain some non-negotiable principles (such as opposing labelling by ability or rejecting assumptions about the worth of different

kinds of work). And in order to ensure the success of the work with children, at certain points Alison championed and led the process in a way that left teachers sidelined—literally, in the case of her pupil voice assemblies. It is therefore important to note that when Alison went on to become a head teacher herself, rather than a deputy as she was here, her key focus was to address teacher voice alongside pupil voice, working right from the start to value all staff, to renew their confidence in their professional judgement and to encourage the development of skills and qualifications—achieved not through compliance with an externally imposed model of standards and assessment, but 'through flourishing in an environment of discovery, teamwork and trust' (Peacock, 2005, p. 94).

Pupil voice undoubtedly troubles existing relationships and identities, but it also fosters new ones, as this account reveals. Changing relationships between pupils and teachers ultimately became supportive as teachers came to see how, in Alison's words, 'they don't want to hurt you, they just want to make it better' and as pupils were encouraged to understand the dilemmas of teaching. Perhaps with more difficulty, hierarchical relationships between different staff members diminished too. And teachers were eventually enabled to take up a different relationship to themselves, redefining their professionalism in terms of collegiality with other staff as well as with children (Fielding, 1999).

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