

## COMMENTARY

### Students' voice, aspirations, and perspectives: international reflections and comparisons

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The findings in this special issue, gives a strong evidence for students' capacity both to contribute with insight on their own teaching and learning, as well provide suggestions and solutions on how to improve the education system. But the data from the Centre Research Study also indicates that even if many institutions have systems where they consult students about the changes in education programs, students experience much of it as 'tokenistic' and lacking credibility. This is particularly evident in the cases of assessment and qualification. Compared to Norwegian students, English students seem to lack real influence of many aspects of their own education.

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This issue of the journal emphasizes students' voice, aspirations, and perspectives in education, based upon the Centre Research Study (CREST Study), which engaged a range of educational stakeholders on the 14-19 reforms in England. Even though students are the heart of each school and the main persons to be affected by the educational system, they have historically not been regarded as significant in matters of schooling (Tierny and Dilley 2002). Students' perceptions of the learning environment in schools are not often valued or taken into account, and even less so if students have special educational needs (Ferguson, Hanredy, and Draxton 2011). The CREST Study therefore contributes an important knowledge and it is a welcome contribution to the research community, policy-makers, and beyond. Not only the research papers acknowledge students' perspectives, but they also emphasize the voices of marginal groups such as students in special schools and the low-achieving students who do not always feel engaged as a part of the school community (Duffy and Elwood this issue; Feiler this issue). As Feiler (this issue) comments, remarkably few studies have been conducted in the UK or internationally on curriculum initiatives for students with special educational needs and disabilities.

The skills demanded by the labor marked are rapidly changing, with computerization reducing the demand for routine manual and routine cognitive tasks, and increasing the need for skills associated with nonroutine cognitive tasks (Autor, Levy, and Murnane 2003). Students are expected to develop complex thinking skills and the ability to transfer skills and knowledge to novel situations. Education systems around the world are changing their assessment systems, curricula, and instruction to meet the demands of the twenty-first century (Darling-Hammond 2008). Following the financial crises in the 2008, youth unemployment in

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Europe has challenged students' perspectives regarding their futures. In March 2012, the Guardian published data from an OECD report showing that one out of five young people in France, Sweden, Ireland, Poland, Italy, and the UK was out of work (Sedghi 2012). In an increasingly competitive labor market, where it is argued that 'the most powerful jobs and best economic returns are associated with good quality human capital, as evidenced by knowledge, skills and qualifications' (Rose and Baird this issue, 157), the number of applications to university in England has declined with 7% in 2012 from previous years, coinciding with the introduction of tuition fees of £9000. These numbers need to be taken into account, especially in relation to the fact that the majority of the students within the CREST study are highly aspirational and would like to go to the university at 18+ (Rose and Baird this issue). If asking students to participate, there are expectations raised about being heard. The CREST study showed that 'young people are highly aspirational, but they need opportunity to unleash those aspirations' (Rose and Baird this issue, 170).

If we were to compare the UK system with others within the European context, the education system described by students within the CREST study and their experiences of qualification pathways is strikingly different.

As a former teacher and researcher in Norway, the education system in Norway sits within a more egalitarian society where the government supports free education for all, from primary school to the University, and where the overall education motive has been 'social equality through equal rights' (Volckmar 2008). Universities do not have any fees, and entrance is based upon students' grades only. The Norwegian society value ideas of 'the participating child', Bjerke (2011) and students have a long history of being active participants influencing their own education. One example is the *School Student Union*<sup>1</sup> which is a national organisation for the students aged 13–18. The School Student Union is an active stakeholder working for students' rights in education with a history going back 50 years. Their goal is to '...work every day so that Norwegian students will have the worlds best school'.

Through this union, students participate in hearings on official policy documents and regularly attend meetings with the Directorate for Teaching and Training as well as the Ministry of Education to discuss issues relevant for students' education in Norway. Some of their work has also been published together with scholars in the field of assessment, reflecting the special dialogue between the expert and the novice, the students, and the professors (Sjyvollen 2007). Among the Union's achievements are the laws that give students in Norway free school books and the right to have student councils in all Norwegian schools.

In November 2012, The School Student Union launched a new campaign with a particular focus upon pupil participation<sup>2</sup>. The campaign comprised material that was developed in cooperation with the Norwegian Directorate for Teaching and Training, the Teacher Union, and the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), the municipal employers' organisation. The material included examples of questions that could be used in dialog between pupils and teachers to improve teaching and learning in Norwegian schools. The focus of the questions is how teachers and students together can improve the quality of the teaching and learning processes by discussing learning goals for subjects, learning strategies, organisation, and content of the teaching. Questions such as 'Do you find the teaching challenging enough?' and 'Are you prepared for your teaching?' are meant to help teachers and students to engage in respectful and meaningful dialog about teaching and learning, with the shared goal of increasing the understanding for each others experience of the schools. These active involvements from students have developed a culture where students are expecting to participate and be listened to.

Another example of the strong position for students in Norwegian schools can be seen in the new addition to the Education Act from 2009, which included four principles for

improving assessment for learning in Norwegian schools. The Education Act is extremely relevant in relation to CREST study reported on in this special issue, as this work was also about qualifications reform among other reforms that students were consulted about. The Education Act now states that the main purpose of assessment is for learning based on the following principles:

- (1) Students should be able to understand what they are going to learn and what is expected of them.
- (2) Students should get feedback that informs them about the quality of their work and their level of achievement.
- (3) Students should be advised on how to improve their learning outcome.
- (4) Students should be engaged in their own learning by assessing their own work and their own learning.

These principles emphasize that all students in Norway have the right to be involved in their own teaching, learning and assessment, and the policy message to schools is that student participation for all students are one of the quality indicators of a good school. Even if it is early days for the new Education Act in Norway, there are some indications from research showing change in teacher and student roles based upon these initiatives (Hopfenbeck et al. 2012; Sandvik et al. 2012).

In sober contrast, O'Boyle (this issue) reports how English students are facing the lack of recognition for who they are, without value in the public discourse about education. Their language is devalued and not afforded equal weight. O'Boyle (this issue) is suggesting that researches need to not only give students' voice, but demonstrate how students' insight in their own lives and how learning in school can enhance the understanding of students learning, their hopes and aspirations. Similarly, Elwood (this issue) describes how students in the CREST are often consulted about the classroom processes, approaches to teaching, and the ways of learning, but some of them experience these evaluations more as keeping an eye on the teachers, rather than being really interested in students' perspectives on teaching and learning more generally. As quoted, one student suggested: 'I think it is more to monitor the teachers than seeing what we think is best' (Elwood this issue, 103). If students experience different initiatives to include them in education as superficial tools to monitor the system or teachers, instead of really listening to them, there is a real danger of demotivating students. The data from the CREST study indicated that even if many institutions have systems where they consult students of the changes in education programs, students experience much of it as 'tokenistic' and lacking credibility. Elwood (this issue, 97) suggests that despite the attempt to involve students, the result is that they may in reality still remain voiceless, and without influencing some of the most significant educational reforms. This is particularly evident in the cases of assessment and qualification. The key message from the author of this article is therefore important:

By authorising student voice in this area, policy makers and qualifications developers must be prepared to share authority about examination and assessment matters with students and to re-think who is authoritative about these aspects of educational life. (Elwood this issue, 109)

To include students' voices, and to be prepared to listen to them and to effect real change, is challenging in many ways. Authorizing student voice means that adults have to listen to experiences from students' perspectives which they may not wish to know about. One example is found in the paper by Duffy and Elwood (this issue) who report results

from focus groups with the students who were classified as disengaged by their institutions. Their stories are hard to read, revealing that in their relations with teachers they can feel a lack of respect, or experience being shouted at, even screamed at, and are punished through the use of exclusion from teaching. Being excluded from classrooms makes it even more challenging for the students to learn, since they are not always able to catch up with what they have missed. The authors acknowledge that they do not have data from teachers' perspectives, even so the stories from the students are worth listening to. To what degree are students really included? And how do schools include all students, including the marginalized in as considered in the CREST study? One example of such a group is described as young persons who struggle to engage in school, and are often associated with disruptive behavior, low attainments, or under-achievement. These students are more likely than any other group to end up as NEET (not engaged in any education, employment, or training activities post 16) and therefore it is of great importance to target disengaged students and support them through their education (Duffy and Elwood this issue).

In a study comparing English and Norwegian teacher students, it was found that that Norwegian teachers appear to focus on the E in the EBD – the *emotional* side of emotional and behavioral difficulties (Stephens, Kyriacou, and Tønnesen 2007; Stephens, Tønnesen, and Kyriacou 2004). With support of on-site counselors, teachers often use dialog to talk through problems with students, endorsed by government-backed research (Bru, Stephens, and Torsheim 2002; Ogden 1998; Olweus and Thyholdt 2002; Roland and Sørensen Vaaland 2003). In contrast, students' misbehavior in English classrooms tends to trigger the use of sanctions to control more than in the Norwegian classrooms (Hultgren and Stephens 1999). Norwegian policy documents have, for a long time, emphasized teachers as caring people, and placed more emphasis on teachers' cooperation with students than controlling them: 'In cooperation with their pupils, colleagues and senior staff, student teachers should be able to cultivate a positive class/group climate' (Kirke, Utdannings-Og Forskningsdepartementet 1999, 48). The idea of a professional caring teacher can also be seen in other Scandinavian countries, such as Sweden (Backman et al. 2011) where the democratic dialogs in schools and student participation is pronounced.

From a Norwegian perspective, there seems to be a considerable unrealized potential in getting English students even more involved in their own education, particularly in aspects such as assessment and qualifications. The findings in this special issue, give strong evidence for students' capacity both to contribute with insight on their own teaching and learning, as well provide suggestions and solutions on how to improve the education system. So, in an increasingly complex globalized education system, can the English school system afford to continue to keep students' voiceless?

## Notes

1. <http://elev.no/SSUN> (accessed March 27, 2013). Information in English on the School Student Union.
2. <http://elev.no/Elevmedvirkning.no/Laerer/Undervisningsevaluering> (accessed March 27, 2013). Undervisningsvurdering – en veileder for elever og lærere (Assessing teaching. A guide for students and teachers). Utdanningsdirektoratet (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training).

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