

EDITORIAL

Students: researching voice, aspirations and perspectives in the context of educational policy change in the 14–19 phase

Background

This special issue focuses on considerations of students' voices and perspectives about their experiences, views and involvement in a range of educational settings and pathways within the 14–19 phase of education in the context of significant policy transformation. We report from the findings of the Centre Research Study (CRest), which was designed as a longitudinal study to investigate the impact of policy change over five years on 52 case institutions across England. Data reported here were collected in 2009–2010, around the time of the parliamentary elections. The study was commissioned by policy researchers at Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) at a time when 14–19 education and training was a major policy priority of the Labour government.¹ In the foreword to the final report of the CRest study, Cresswell wrote that the research was designed to provide 'a deep and long-term evaluation of the impact on young people and their educational experience of the last Labour government's flagship 14–19 curriculum reform programme' (Baird et al. 2011, 7).

In an earlier special issue edited by Hodgson and Spours (2011) on 14–19 education and training policy in the UK, the authors reflected on new political and economic educational landscapes created by the succession of the present coalition government in England and the growing independence of the devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. The authors within the special issue raised many questions about the ramifications of these new contexts for debate, coherence and divergence within 14–19 provision between systems and nations who had once generally cohered across qualifications provision but who are now becoming more fragmented and less aligned with each other in pursuit of within-country political agendas. This current special issue complements the Hodgson and Spours edition through a detailed consideration of students' views of their educational experiences within the 14–19 phase; treating young people as a specific, equal group of stakeholders with particular contributions to add to these debates (Elwood 2012).

In bringing to the fore myriad voices from the young people who participated in the CRest study, this special issue gives detailed consideration of their educational experiences emanating from very different contexts and perspectives. These young voices emanate from a political and economic landscape in England during a critical moment in time for educational reform as well as a heightened political context around national elections.

Case studies of policy enactment

The CRest project was unusual in its design because it was a longitudinal, multiple-case, embedded design (Yin 2009, 46) looking at the enactment of numerous policies in local contexts. By embedded design, we mean that we were interested in looking at features within cases and aggregating data across cases, such as analysing the data thematically and by particular policies or stakeholder groups. The Labour government's 14–19 educational reform

programme incorporated multiple reforms. From the outset, we had to be realistic about the prospect of policy stability in the field of education over the intended five-year duration of the research, even if the 2010 election did not produce regime change. Putting all of this together, the project set out to handle large-volume, mixed-method data relating to adaptable research questions. CReSt was a study of policy enactment in the case institutions and we were therefore interested in *how* the policies not only played out in practice, but *whether* they played out at all. Our methodological position was to collect data on how policies were viewed from the perspective of the cases, or more specifically, from the people in the case institutions. This methodological move meant that the research findings would be important beyond the specifics of the policies themselves and would give us a broader view of how educational policies are seen (or not) by the people whose behaviour and experiences they are intended to influence. Furthermore, it allowed the stakeholders involved to set the research agenda to a larger extent.

As well as questionnaires with teachers ($n=880$) and students ($n=1,780$) and focus groups with these stakeholders (21 with teachers, 45 with students), we conducted interviews with parents (17), head teachers (18), partnership managers (14), curriculum managers (3), governors (15) and others (4) in each of 18 case institutions in the first year of the project. The questionnaires were distributed across the entire 52 case institutions. Cases were selected to be a representative sample of schools and colleges throughout England and seven special units were also included (Gorard et al. 2008; QCA 2009). Case studies of the institutions had been conducted in prior projects, which this research drew upon. Elements of the research design were retained from these baseline studies, so that comparisons over time would be possible. We analysed the questionnaire data using statistical techniques and used retroductive (Bulmer 1979) coding of the qualitative data, which involves both deductive (driven by theory) and inductive (driven by data) coding. Management of this large, qualitative database of over two and a quarter million words was made possible by use of NVivo software. Twenty-three high-level codes were created and many of these were then coded at a second level relating to thematic analyses. Training meetings were held for coders and checks were conducted on inter-coder consistency. All project members conducted coding and research assistants were employed to conduct some of this work. Case reports for the 18 institutions were also produced.

Researchers conducting large-scale case study work like this in future might wish to note that contingency plans are needed for disasters at various levels. During the year of data collection, we compensated for the effects of volcanic eruptions, floods and hospitalisation of project staff due to illness and accident (both made a full recovery). Another difficulty was the effect of the dissolution of the funding body. Its immediate effect meant that we had changing project managers there, with different views on the research aims, design, reporting, dissemination and so on. We mention this here, as it was a resource-consuming aspect of conducting policy-relevant research funded by a government agency that was closing.

Our design was constructed to investigate the cases over time, in the knowledge that the policies would change around them. This research is limited, therefore, by the fact that we were not conducting an evaluation of the implementation process or impact of any particular policy. The reforms were conceptualised by the funders as emanating from the policy documents *14–19 Educational and Skills Implementation Plan* (DCSF 2005) and *Delivering Reform: Next Steps* (DCSF 2008). They included assessment reforms: introduction of Diplomas, functional skills qualifications, extended projects, foundation learning and changes to Key Stage 3, GCSE and A-level. Additionally, there were funding changes, entitlement policies and raising the participation age from 16 to 18. Some of the policies that were considered to be very important and influential nationally by QCDA or the Department for

Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) turned out to have little mention in our data (e.g. the introduction of a Qualifications Credit Framework), whereas other policy changes that were not on the bureaucrats' radar were having larger impacts upon practice (e.g. changes to BTEC curricula). As we focus upon the student stakeholders in this special issue, some of the other findings of the project relating to policy enactment are not reported here. Findings on partnership arrangements between institutions, which were a key feature of the Diploma policies (see also Rose 2012), strategic management of the institutions through policy reform and the perspectives of the other stakeholders are reported more fully in the final report of the project (Baird et al. 2011). Articles have also been published from this project on special school perspectives (Feiler 2010), students' perspectives (Elwood 2012), Further Education students' aspirations (Baird, Rose, and McWhirter 2012) and from the baseline studies on student engagement (Gorard and Huat See 2011; Lumby 2011, 2012).

A significant message for policy-makers was that educational stakeholders navigated the unprecedented range of policy reform, rather than directly implement government initiatives en masse; they made strategic decisions in the interests their institutions, given their local context, student bodies and their aims and values. Educational institutions and their leaders were impressively wily to the fact that to be successful, policy needs to be understood and *seen to be valuable* by young people, their parents, teachers and school communities.

Participation of students in research with policy impact

A specific aim of the CReSt study, which was encouraged by the funder, was not only to investigate policy enactment, but also to use the data to influence policy. This project aim signalled a wish for deeper policy learning from within QCDA. Constitution of the project advisory board reflected this, such that there were representatives from various policy areas within DCSF and QCDA. Moreover, the research team were involved in several advisory capacities to government and its agencies (e.g. QCDA, DCSF and Ofqual) and other policy arenas (e.g. awarding bodies), as well as research forums and we undertook several engagements with the aim of policy influence resulting from the CReSt data. Findings of the study contributed to formal submissions to governmental reviews (e.g. the Bew Inquiry on Key Stage 2 testing – Bew 2011) and select committee investigations into qualifications reform (Education Select Committee Inquiry on Testing at 15–19 (Baird and Isaacs 2012; Hansard 2012).

In being explicit about policy influence, we took seriously the call from Cook-Sather (2002) to afford young people opportunities to actively shape their education. Including young people as equal participants in a study of policy reform was a way for the research team to align processes and practices with the growing involvement of children and young people more generally in policy decision-making (Sinclair 2004; Tisdall 2008) as well as to deliberately acknowledge those statutory obligations on public authorities (such as QCDA) to consult children about policies that affect them directly (Harris 2009). Fleming (2012) reminded us of the extent to which young people's participation has been mainstreamed in much policy and practice in the UK but that we still have some way to go in terms of young people's direct involvement in public decision-making. Often opportunities offered to young people to be consulted or participate are through 'structures created by adults and on agendas set by adults – 'participation by invitation' (Fleming 2012, 8–9). While conscious that we were 'inviting' young people to participate in the CReSt study with agendas for the research being set by us as adults, the focus of the work with them reflected our attempts to obtain their direct views of private, intra-institutional consultations as well as their opinions on those more public educational policy reforms that affect them directly. In asking direct

questions and supporting dialogue about such public reforms, our aim was to feedback directly to government and advisors young people's views on current, high-level educational issues. As well as this, we were also concerned to get first-hand accounts of young people's lived experiences of education in the 14–19 phase as a way of putting back onto the agenda those items, important to young people emerging in the context of educational reform, that are all too often lost because of 'normative barriers' (Hodge 2005) that control the consultation agenda with young people.

Changing and chopping – the impact of policy on the project

Data included in this special issue were from the first, and only, year of the project, as things transpired. In the project's foreshortened lifetime, the commissioning body (QCA) was reformed to become the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) and the regulatory part of QCA was split into the new examinations regulator (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation – Ofqual). Both new agencies were moved from London to Coventry. By 2010, when the first year's report was being completed, the policy context involved a new, Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government who initiated what has come to be known as the 'bonfire of the quangos' (Pring et al. 2009, 197). QCDA were high on the list of organisations to be cut. DCSF was re-named the Department for Education. Policy and project contact points were therefore passing us like ships in the night, and policy memory and learning were not in abundance. A global economic recession too influenced government research funding. Funding for CReSt was cut after the first year of data collection, together with a long list of other research projects. There is a deep irony in the fact that the study was discontinued due to a change in policy, as the very phenomenon under investigation was the effect of policy change, albeit upon educational institutions.

Contributions to the special edition

The research with students in CReSt study saw them as key actors in their educational settings and important stakeholders in terms of policy learning about the impact of 14–19 educational reforms and implementation within institutions in local contexts. This special issue contributes to knowledge in the areas of students' voices, aspirations and perspectives in the 14–19 phase of education, by presenting student voices in policy fields where they continue to be voiceless (Elwood), exploring the salient factors for students in relation to disengagement (Duffy and Elwood), examining why young people's talk is discounted (O'Boyle); discussing the limited involvement of special educational institutions, and especially their students' voices, in educational reform policy (Feiler) and a contemporary analysis of young people's hopes and goals (Rose and Baird). There are also three commentaries from authors external to the CReSt project, which reflect on the debates and issues raised by the papers, bringing alternative perspectives from the authors' insider understanding of policy issues (Isaacs), contrasting educational systems (Hopfenbeck) and students' perspectives research (Hayward). Isaacs writes about a flagship part of the 14–19 reforms that ultimately failed (the Diploma), due to being overly complex and having to fit frameworks unsuitable for their delivery. Hopfenbeck writes that other jurisdictions value the contribution of young people in their decision-making processes, even in areas of high-level, strategic importance. Finally, Hayward leaves us with a conundrum of why, on the strength of the research evidence, learners are not routinely involved in decisions about their own learning as well as educational decisions that impact on both the individual and society.

The data from the CReSt study add to the established work providing strong reasons for young people's participation in policy making – to strengthen the legitimacy and accountability of the institutions, provide services that are more efficient and better suited to young people's needs, and attend to greater social justice in addressing the challenges and issues young people face (Brodie, Cowling, and Nissen 2009).

Note

1. The idea for the study and its initial design was Alison Matthews' – then Head of Research at QCDA.

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