

COMMENTARY

From why to why not? The conundrum of including learners' perspectives: a response to this Special Issue

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This commentary explores the conundrum of why learners are not routinely involved in decisions about their own learning. It suggests that engaging learners in their own learning and in the development of education systems is central to the improvement of education. Given the evidence from this Special Issue that all learners have the potential to engage fully in education systems and processes, the commentary concludes that the question why involve learners should change to ask questions of those who do not involve learners as a matter of course in educational decisions that impact on both the individual and society.

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To risk stating the obvious, the central concern of education is learners and their learning. Yet the international business that is education, and in particular educational assessment, often feels far from that ideal as it becomes lost in an eduspeak of measurement data and economic indicators. The papers contained in this special issue focus on learners and are a reminder of the importance of learners' perspectives in both improving their own learning and in enhancing the quality of the education system.

Collectively, the papers eloquently make the case for the imperative to engage learners in processes and practices that both influence learners' lives on a daily basis and play such a powerful role in determining their personal and collective futures. The research evidence reported here illustrates why this Special Issue is so timely, highlighting how comparatively little we understand of why there seems to be such little depth in attempts to release the potential of learners through their participation in learning systems and processes. Rose and Baird (this issue) suggest that much of what is done in the name of enhancing learner participation starts from the wrong place. Instead of conceptualising lack of engagement as a problem associated with poverty of aspiration amongst young people, the writers argue from a strong evidence base (survey data from more than 1700 students in 35 institutions in England) that there is little evidence of any lack of aspiration. Rather, the young people who participated offered a sophisticated analysis of the current social and economic climate and the negative impact of that climate on their potential to realise their aspirations.

Adults consistently underestimate young people's ability to participate in and to think critically about the world in which they live. The learners in these papers tell a different

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story. In O'Boyle (this issue), the writer explores the tensions between, on the one hand, the idea of young people as linguistic innovators whose language changes thinking and, on the other, stakeholder communities who pay insufficient attention to the young people's discourse because of its apparent lack of consistency with their own language norms. The discourse analysis undertaken demonstrates the capacity of the young people to participate in complex discussions about significant issues. Perhaps, most disturbingly, the young people recognised the games they had to play presenting the 'good communication skills' (Cameron 1995) required of them, whilst recognising their lack of impact on important discussions, their lack of an influential voice and the shortfall in their status as social actors (O'Boyle this issue). The learners are all too aware that the actions of powerful adult stakeholder groups suggest that, consciously or subconsciously, they do not believe that all learners have the desire and the potential to think about and to participate in regulating their own or their peers' learning within schools.

This lack of belief in the potential of young people to participate is a particular issue with groups often described as marginalised. The young people in the Duffy and Elwood paper (this issue) who are described as educationally disengaged and those in Feiler's (this issue) who attend special schools and a secure unit have powerful contributions to make to their own learning, but their opportunities to contribute as active citizens are limited. The writers in both papers argue that the experiences of the young people in these groups simply amplify the experiences of all learners. Locating the difficulties within the learner sits uneasily with the espoused commitment to inclusive education in policy statements across the UK. It also allows powerful stakeholder groups to avoid the inconvenient truth that educational disengagement and learning challenges are issues for most learners, issues which if faced could have significant implications for educational systems.

Yet, stakeholders do not appear to believe that learners have a worthwhile contribution to make in shaping education systems. Elwood (this issue) brings together a range of issues emerging across the Special Issue. Commonly, consultation is tokenistic, seeking the views of young people on limited topics and not encouraging learners to participate in issues of major significance to their lives. Perhaps the most powerful example of this relates to the role of student voice in contributing to thinking on the emerging examinations systems, systems that have a significant impact on the lives of young people. Although Elwood (this issue) recognised that institutions sought students' perspectives on policy and practice within institutions, too often these practices were perfunctory. Students had powerful things to say about examinations systems and recognised themselves as being on the front line of examination reform; it would be their lives that would be affected if innovations were unsuccessful, but still they 'expressed a sense of incredulity that government would ever seek their views on the reform of national qualifications systems' (108).

The conundrum of learners' perspectives

It would seem that powerful stakeholder groups do know that it is important to be seen to encourage learners to participate. There is evidence of this in curriculum design. For example, the curriculum in each of the four countries of the UK places considerable emphasis on active citizenship, the encouragement of young people to understand and to engage in democratic processes (Wyse and Gallagher 2012). However, if this is to be more than an academic exercise, then young people need to understand issues such as the nature of influence, the importance of taking principled decisions and the limits of compromise. They need to build their experience of what it is like to be an active player in a democratic community just as much as they need to know about political systems. The opportunities

afforded to deepen young people's understanding of why active participation in democratic society matters are considerable in education, particularly in situations where the stakes for young people are high.

There is also a strong evidence base from research emphasising the importance of learner participation in assessment processes and assessment systems. Since the publication of the Black and Wiliam (1998a) research review highlighted the potential of assessment to enhance learning and to raise achievement, Assessment for Learning (AfL) has become an international phenomenon attracting interest amongst teachers and policy makers. In the 15 years following the review, understanding of the complexity of what matters if assessment is to improve learning has deepened significantly. For example, the realisation that superficially similar approaches to AfL resulted in very different levels of impact on learning led Marshall and Drummond (2006) to distinguish between the 'spirit' and the 'letter' of AfL. In classrooms where teachers used techniques associated with AfL with little understanding of their rationale or theoretical base, there was minimal positive impact on learning. In classrooms where AfL was making a positive difference to learning, a much more complicated 'spirit' of assessment was in evidence. Hayward (2012) argued that the spirit of AfL was evident where it was being enacted as a vehicle for sociocultural transformation where learning was a community endeavour. This transformation involved the establishment of different power relationships within classrooms, schools and wider educational and social communities. Changes to the enactment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in schools and classrooms were also evident.

However, as implications for practice from the Black and Wiliam (1998a) review began to be explored in the literature, the focus was almost entirely limited to changing teachers' practices (Black and Wiliam 1998a, 1998b; Black et al. 2002, 2003, 2010; Hallam et al. 2004; Hayward, Priestly, and Young 2004; Condie, Livingston, and Seagraves 2005). Now, increasingly, the focus is moving from teachers to learners. In a research review of the impact of self and peer assessment on pupils in secondary schools, Sebba et al. (2008) identified that self and peer assessment had led to a positive impact in 17 out of the 20 studies analysed. This positive impact included features such as learners demonstrating increased engagement with learning, especially in setting goals and clarifying objectives, taking greater responsibility for learning and increased confidence. They also described a number of conditions likely to have an effect on whether or not self and peer assessment would have a positive impact on learning. These included the culture of the classroom, including the commitment of the teacher to learners having greater control of their own learning and a change in the power relationships in classrooms from one where pupils were dependent on their teachers to one where there was an interdependent relationship in which teachers and pupils discussed learning and teaching and teachers changed their teaching as a result of such discussions. Pedder and James (2012) suggested that sophisticated models of self and peer assessment students were essential for the development of learners as 'autonomous, independent and active' (2012, 28), essential qualities for effective learning. They identified three necessary learner characteristics – motivation, analysis and evaluation, and action: that is, the motivation to reflect on their previous learning and identify objectives for future learning; the ability to analyse and evaluate barriers to learning being experienced and determine how progress might be made; and through self regulation action to improve their learning.

There is evidence that all learners are capable of engaging in sophisticated models of participation. The papers in this study show the potential amongst young people in secondary schools and in special schools and units. In a study undertaken in Scotland (Hayward, Boyd, and Dow 2008), pupils in primary school demonstrated similar capabilities. The pupils aged 10–11 were clear about what mattered to them in learning. They wanted more than just to

be given a set of learning goals; they wanted to be engaged in decision-making about the content of the curriculum. They wanted to be involved in reflecting on the learning experience, what had gone well, what might be improved next time and how improvements might best be made. They were happy to contribute both to discussions that would lead to changes in their own learning experiences and to conversations where their opinions would be used to support the learning of future learners. They wanted to have a degree of choice in learning content and pedagogy. They valued the input of their teacher and the input of their peers, recognising that talking ideas through with their peers helped them to engage more deeply in learning. Pupils in the primary schools involved in this study were comfortable with the greater levels of participation being asked of them. They were less comfortable in teacher-dominated environments where they were asked to conform rather than to engage. Having a voice, they suggested, was a key factor in motivating them as learners.

Learner participation, the evidence suggests, is more than a gesture of goodwill from those with a liberal attitude towards education or young people. It is crucial to high-quality learning; but, the evidence from the papers in this journal suggests that the impact of ideas of learner participation seems largely to be dependent on the chance of individual teachers and policy-makers being convinced of the importance of democratic classrooms and their being able to live these ideas as part of their own practices. The idea that consultation with learners is something of which people need to be convinced is striking, since children and young people have the legal right to be consulted. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states in plain language that when adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account (Lundy 2007). Leitch et al. (2007) used Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to examine students' participation in their own assessment. Using Lundy's analysis (2007), they concluded that children and young people could participate in significant discussions about learning, teaching and assessment, if given real opportunities in classrooms, the chance to express their views (Space), their views being facilitated (Voice), listened to (Audience) and, as appropriate, acted upon (Influence). The researchers found that the young people were motivated to focus on their learning and the learning of their peers. They also wanted to be involved in decision-making. Sebba, analysing experiences of AfL practice in a number of OECD countries (Sebba 2012), suggests that in the lived spirit of AfL learners would become 'agents of change in their own schools' (198). However, the original study in 2005, (OECD) found little evidence of this happening in practice. Elwood and Lundy (2010) suggest a need to refocus thinking about the relationship between assessment and children's rights. They encourage a focus on the right of each individual to assessment experiences that support the realisation of the aims of education, rather than a more traditional emphasis on a narrow range of assessment methods often used in ways that contribute little to any extended concept of learning.

Conclusion

Despite an ever-growing evidence base to suggest the centrality of having learners' participate fully in learning processes and systems, the concept is still contested. Commonly, the domain of learner participation in assessment is divided into two inter-related areas: involving learners in assessment processes, that is participation in decisions about their own learning and the learning of their peers, and involving learners in assessment systems, that is participation in decision-making about matters of educational policy. Both are equally important; but, the evidence would suggest that a little more progress is being made on the first than the second. The argument for learners being full participants in the

processes and practices of education in classrooms and as policy is irrefutable. The concept of active participation in democratic society is built into national curricula; the research evidence to suggest its importance in improving the learning experiences of every learner is consistent; and the legal framework is in place to ensure the right of every child to be consulted and learners want to be consulted in meaningful ways. The papers in this issue and the work with younger children undertaken in Scotland demonstrate the maturity of learners' understanding of the way the world works, be they learners in primary or in secondary schools, in special schools or units. They do not expect to dictate to others, nor do they expect that every suggestion they make will lead to action, but they do want to be part of a respectful community where views are valued and compromises explored.

The essential conundrum of learner engagement in educational systems and processes is essentially the question why it does not happen as a matter of course. From an external perspective, it might seem obvious that involving people in decisions about their own learning and their own lives is likely to build greater commitment to their education. Yet, it is clear both from previous studies and from the papers in this Special Issue that seeking to engage all learners in decision-making is still regarded as an innovation. Perhaps changing the discourse from one which seeks to persuade major stakeholders to encourage student participation to one which asks why not engage all students in meaningful participation will be necessary. The evidence emerging from these papers may prove to be an important source of evidence to inform that process.

Notes on contributor

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