

Symposium Proposal for NZARE Session to be held at AERA 2009

Symposium Presenters

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Discussant

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Title of Symposium

Involving young people as collaborators in educational research: insights on challenges and opportunities in the New Zealand context

Symposium Abstract

Internationally, the importance of student voice has been acknowledged over the past fifteen years or more. Noyes (2005) and Laura (2006) attribute this emphasis on the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). However, inclusion of young children and young people as collaborators in educational research initiatives is still sporadic and undertheorised. Fielding (2004) has framed some of the issues of including student voices in educational research around four key themes: problems of speaking *about* others, problems of speaking *for* others, possibilities of speaking *about/for* others in supportive ways, and the dialogic alternative of speaking *with* rather than *for* others. Other educational researchers have also identified that, in order to establish respectful relationships with young people in educational research,, researchers need to carefully consider their epistemological positioning and those of their subjects (Kinchin, 2004), as well as their methodology and conceptualization of voice (Cook-Sather, 2006). This symposium presents empirical evidence in the voices of children and young people from four different

New Zealand research projects. The four papers present analyses of young people's insights into learning, emotions, research, dialogue and participation.

Symposium Proposal

The aim of this symposium is to contribute to the AERA Conference's role in examining, discussing and expanding the role of educational research as a hub of scholarship and debate incorporating multidisciplinary research and multiple perspectives. In this symposium, four presenters from different research contexts in New Zealand will present findings from their studies involving young people ranging in age from 2 to 16 years of age to report what happens when education researchers invite and listen to student voice on the topic of learning itself.

The concept of student voice in education is not new and may be regarded as already well-served through the current democratic processes in schools such as school councils, or student representation on school boards of trustees. In New Zealand, the notion of actively seeking and responding to student voice on curriculum and learning issues is gradually coming to the fore. The Best Evidence Synthesis (Timperley et al., 2007) cites the recent research drawing on student voice namely Bishop et al's (2006) Te Kotahitanga on raising the achievement of Maori students in mainstream schools. There is still much to be done to take up the challenge made by New Zealand academic Anne Smith (1998) to educators ten years ago, when she observed:

Students have been the objects of the academic gaze and have not been recognised as social actors in their own right Despite our enthusiasm for the monitoring of quality in education, there has been little attempt to ask children their views about their education in order to improve the effectiveness of teaching. We do not have a culture of listening to children and children are not accustomed to being asked their opinions. Children's knowledge and understanding in the context of their own lives are only rarely used in policy, institutional practice or research. I am not arguing that children's wishes should always be met, or that their perspective is the only one, merely that we need to provide opportunities for children to express their views, listen to them respectfully, take them into account, take action where possible, and remain in continuing dialogue with them. (Smith, 1998, p. 69)

This challenge has inspired the design of this symposium where four researchers working in different educational contexts present their findings and analyses showing that children and young people have much to offer the researcher, when they are given the opportunity to voice their experience and opinions. A common theme to consider in the methodologies is the need for safe emotional and dialogic space for young people to share their knowledge through collaborative research and respectful, authentic relationships. While we wish to draw attention to the ways that even very young children have the wisdom, understanding and metacognitive skills to collaborate with researchers and teachers towards successful learning and achievement, we also wish to signal that student voices have been shaped by previous experiences in the system and are still a social construction in need of careful interrogation.

Educational importance of symposium

The present symposium directs attention to the role of student voice in the actual learning process itself rather than to school policies (see for example Rudduck & Fielding, 2006) or school environments (see for example Kaba, 2001). Each of the research projects reported in this seminar has conducted their investigations with students in a *collaborative* approach.

Organization of symposium

The symposium will commence with our discussant providing an overview of “student voice”, followed by four presented papers that describe recent New Zealand research in which children and young people were given the opportunity to freely voice their unique perspectives and insights on learning and:

1. emotions (O’Toole),
2. critical literacy (Sandretto),
3. research skills (de Vocht-Van Alphen),
4. negotiation of dialogic space (Andreotti).

Our discussant will provide critical comment on these papers in light of current research and will draw attention to future research requirements.

Paper 1

“Some people don’t really bother asking you questions like that”: Children’s theories about emotion and learning in the elementary school classroom.

Presenting Author: Veronica O’Toole, University of Canterbury

Twenty-four children answered “questions like that” during video-cued interviews, inviting children’s verbal self-reports of their thoughts and feelings during selected learning tasks. Analysis of these interviews in triangulation with the extensive observational, video and recorded data, confirms the validity and reliability of these children’s self-reports. Further, their theories on emotion and learning are consistent with psychology theory (see for example Lazarus, 1991; Oatley, 1992), while allowing for vocabulary differences. Their descriptions of the ways that emotion may or may not support learning and their suggestions as to how emotions may be managed to support learning are consistent with emotional intelligence theory (see for example Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2004). These were new conversations with the children, and their hypotheses newly vocalized and heard. Their theories came from four to five years of prior experience in primary school contexts. Their metacognitive skills and emotional awareness bode well for including children as collaborators with teachers and researchers toward optimizing their emotional engagement in learning tasks.

This study was conducted within the Project on Learning (Nuthall, 2002) extending the multimodal methodology initiated by the late Professor Emeritus Graham Nuthall, a long time campaigner for the need to listen to children. This paper will begin with a brief description of the comprehensive data collection through continuous observation, video and audio-recording together with a modified modified experience sampling methodology (ESM) (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) which obtained emotion reports from children during specific learning tasks. These emotion reports were validated through the retrospective video-cued interviews. Selected transcripts from in-depth video-cued interviews with 24 target children across four different classrooms will be presented. The children’s reports demonstrate their understandings of the relationship between emotion and learning that are consistent with theory, thus providing a basis for further research into this emergent research domain in the New Zealand context.

Paper 2: “Critical literacy gets your brain thinking”:

How listening to young people can enhance our understandings of critical literacy

Presenting Author: Susan Sandretto, University of Otago

During three years of New Zealand Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) funded research projects into the development and implementation of critical literacy practices the researchers and participating teachers made use of student stimulated recall interviews (SRIs) to inform their growing understandings of critical literacy and reflect on the ways in which they were integrating critical literacy strategies into their classroom practices. In a previous paper, the researchers interrogated their use of student voice and found that students needed to be made aware of how they were heard, in order for them to find their participation in the research useful. An outcome of the previous paper for the research project was a focus on making explicit to students the ways in which what they were telling the researchers informed the pedagogy of the participating teachers. In this paper we re-examine the SRIs as a means to demonstrate how listening to young people can support critical reflection on ways in which the theory and pedagogy inform each other.

Analysis of the SRIs was underpinned by a poststructural view that considers language and power inseparable. The term discourse captures ways of acting, thinking, speaking, writing, reading and believing that can be used to position oneself, or be positioned, as a member of a particular group (Gee, 1996). In this case, particular discourses of critical literacy will position teachers and students in particular ways. By focussing on the discourses of critical literacy identified in the SRIs, we can consider ways in which theory and practice need each other, as well as the (potential) effects of various discourses of critical literacy.

After discussing the discourses of critical literacy invoked by the students and locating them within the wider literature, the paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of student understandings of critical literacy for the theory, pedagogy and policy of critical literacy in the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

Paper 3: “Just tell us what to do, so we can get on with it”: Exploring co-research with secondary students.

Presenting Author: Lia de Vocht-van Alphen, Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa/ NZCA

This paper discusses findings from a year-long project exploring co-research with secondary students for a Master of Education Dissertation. This project involved students in all stages of the research process, from the formulation of the research question to the presentation of the analysis of data. The rationale for this project was based on the assumption that while research is expected to create new world-knowledge, at school only students learn and their learning tends to be about things that the teacher already knows (Gilbert, 2006). The title, illustrates how students had to ‘liberate themselves from being spectators to being an actor’ (Freire, 1972).

A co-research project by secondary students and a postgraduate student on the understandings of the rules at the school provided the data for a second narrative of secondary school students as co-researchers. Data included questionnaires and in-depth interviews, but also transcripts of weekly discussions and interviews with the co-researching students themselves.

The discussions with the co-researching students provided an insider view of what students think about research; the importance of sexuality and power issues came to the fore. The project can be seen as ‘dialogic research’ (Fielding, 2004, p305), where the act of dialogue and the need to construct new opportunities for dialogic encounters is more important than the content of what is said. The students presented their findings at the school and at educational conferences. Cook-Sather (2002) states that by providing valid and legitimate spaces for students to speak we can no longer ignore students’ critique and the suggestions they offer. I conclude with a discussion on how collaboratively building new knowledge in research can be part of a secondary education programme.

Paper 4: Student voice: Is it all nice and positive, and simple and easy?

Presenting Author: Vanessa Andreotti

While attesting to the vital importance of student voice in education in the 21st century, this paper raises questions and issues related to dialogue between teachers, researchers and learners in educational contexts. Complementing Fielding's (2004) insights into the problems of speaking about, for or with others, this paper offers a critical analysis of tensions that emerge when negotiating dialogic spaces with learners in research projects and pedagogical processes. In the first part of this paper, we use autoethnography (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Bruni 2002; Kostera 2006) to document an experience where listening to student voice became problematic. In the second part, we use critical school ethnography (Stronach & Maclure 1997) to analyse a scenario based on this experience where we apply different theories to address a target problem with a view to generate new insights around some of the tensions in the debate about voice and participation. Using a multi-perspectival approach to educational and social theory, this section explores tensions in terms of teacher authority versus authoritarianism (Freire 2002, Maturana 1997); choice and freedom versus compliance (Deleuze 1994); critical versus uncritical engagement with perspectives (Foucault 1978); and students' interests (and wants) versus students' needs (Bauman 2000). In the third part of this paper, implications for teacher education and classroom practices are summarised.

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