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**Exploring the potential for student leadership
to contribute to school transformation**

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Abstract

This paper reports preliminary findings from case study research in three English secondary schools where a new or recently appointed head has incorporated stakeholder engagement as a key part of their improvement strategy. In each school, developments initiated independently by each head in relation to student leadership are reported. These appear to be re-thinking the boundaries of current practice in relation to student voice, particularly with respect to developing the leadership role of students as agents of change and in beginning to extend that beyond the school into their communities. The research focuses on seeking to understand the processes of change in each case. The models and practices adopted by each head in implementing change are analysed and the effects of this experience, as reported by the students, are considered. Initial findings highlight factors that appear to contribute to successful developments, and the paper concludes with suggestions for further research and investigation to confirm this.

Keywords

Student voice, student leadership, stakeholder engagement, school transformation

Introduction

Students have brought an energy that you never get from adults. They see the change agenda perfectly and they understand it fully.... (It) is having an enormous effect. This, I believe, is where the school will be transformed. You will have student leadership in the classroom and beyond the school as well.

Headteacher, Ashtree School, 26.7.11

The origins of this paper lie in reflecting on that quotation from an interview with a secondary school headteacher in England. It opened up a new line of enquiry in my part-

time doctorate research involving case studies developed over two years in three English secondary schools. Fieldwork was conducted between November 2010 and November 2012. Through it, I wanted to examine more closely the possible inter-connectedness of stakeholder engagement and trust, the role of school leaders, and the potential for impact on educational outcomes.

The three schools included within this study were selected because, although representing differing socio-economic contexts and at different stages of improvement in OFSTED terms, in each a recently appointed head had made an explicit commitment to develop stakeholder engagement as part of their school improvement strategy. This was the main reason for their selection, rather than typicality or random sampling.

Through the interview quoted above, a new emphasis on understanding student leadership opened up in the second year of the research. This was not a direction anticipated at the outset, but it became clear during the first year that all three heads had independently decided this was to be a significant element in their approach to change. I wanted to understand why, and what this meant in practice.

Rationale

I have adopted the term student leadership to describe the focus of enquiry as this was the term most frequently used by all three headteachers to describe what they said they were seeking to develop. Yet there is only a limited research literature around the phrase. What there is suggests it could involve a spectrum of approaches, from structured practices of elections and representations, through which students engage in formal decision-making, to less formal responses through which student leadership practices diffuse and extend beyond schools to engage with the community (Mertkan-Ozunlu and Mullan 2007, McGregor 2007, Lilley 2010).

Moreover, in much of the literature on school leadership, (Hallinger and Heck 2003, Leithwood and Riehl 2005, Hallinger 2011), the role of students as leaders is not discussed. This is also true of the literature on school improvement. For example, Bryk and Schneider (2002) identified three settings in which relational trust acted as a force for improvement in schools; between principal and teacher, teacher and teacher, and between school professionals and parents. Day et al (2009) add two others;

principal/teachers with support (non-teaching) staff, and principals with external agencies (including schools). Neither study makes reference to students in this context, perhaps reinforcing, whether consciously or not, a view that school improvement is something done to schools (and by implication to students) by adults. Similarly, the thrust of government policy in England since 2010 has placed prime focus on the role of teachers and the importance of teaching (DfE 2010).

Notwithstanding the above, there has been a more general research interest into what has been termed pupil, learner or student voice (Cook-Sather 2006). In England, the work of Rudduck and colleagues emphasised listening to student voice, justifying this in terms of its potential for school improvement (Rudduck et al. 1996). However Ranson (2000) links student voice fundamentally to the idea of the school as a democratic community.

Thomson and Gunter (2006) teased out facets of these two lines of discourse about student voice, capturing them in a matrix (Table 1).

	1. Standards and improvement discourse	2. Rights discourse
(a) Consulting pupils	1(a) Students can, if teachers choose, provide information for local interpretation of national policy. This is desirable because it is likely to lead to more effective change	2(a) Students have a right to be involved in locally determined activities with/against policy. They can expect suggestions they make to be heard and acted on
(b) Pupils and school self evaluation	1(b) Students can, if teachers choose, be involved in local interpretation with/against national policy. This is desirable because it is likely to lead to more effective change	2(b) Students have a right to be involved in locally determined activities with/against policy. They can expect suggestions they make to be heard and acted on
(c) Pupils as researchers	1(c) Students can, if teachers choose, be involved in local research for local interpretation with/against national policy. This is desirable because it is likely to lead to more effective change	2(c) Students have a right to determine the nature, scope and conduct of research they do, and to be involved in making recommendations and be involved in their implementation

Table 1: Analysis of understandings of student voice – Thomson and Gunter (2006)

One of the distinguishing features of this matrix, moving from left column to right, is an increasing transfer of power and responsibility from teachers to students. But for

Thomson and Gunter this is contentious and difficult practice. They note particularly a number of inherent tensions: one between extending choice to students whilst controlling its provision; another, the tensions between the student as an individual learner and the student as a part of a social learning community.

Fielding (2006) offers a four-fold typology for examining the way schools use student voice, relating it particularly to the functional and personal dimensions of their organisation. He then focuses on two of these responses in particular. These he terms 'high-performing', in which the personal is used for the sake of the functional, and 'person-centred', where the functional is used for the sake of the personal (p.302). His distinction is at root about a school's motivations in adopting student voice, and whether this is done for particular kinds of adult purposes, for instance to enhance the school's effectiveness or reputation, or whether it is to help young people develop as "*good persons*" (p. 307).

The tensions suggested in both of these accounts concern power, the way it is used and the purposes behind that use. There is an important sense in which some tensions around the concept and practice of student voice are inevitable, maybe even desirable. Students are not the only stakeholders in their schools. They are also growing in maturity as they move through a school, as a result, in part, of what the school does. By definition they do not start - or indeed finish - schooling as a complete person. And schools also develop and change, as does the environment in which they have to work. What the literature appears to lack is a coherent account of the processes by which those tensions may be constructively reconciled and individual and organisational growth can occur.

Student leadership, as encountered in this research, still displays those tensions to some degree, but also appears to be finding ways, however rudimentary, to move beyond them. In all three schools, albeit in slightly different ways, there seems to be a genuine emphasis on students themselves becoming agents of change and, crucially, on understanding and developing the skills staff need to support this. In addition, the focus was at times moving beyond the school to include the influence students might have more widely in their communities.

The research

My research focused on three questions related to stakeholder engagement, and I have applied the first two to the particular issue of student leadership.

- How have heads sought to develop their vision of engagement strategy?
- What effects has this had?
- What evidence is there of its influence on educational outcomes?

Fernandez (2004) suggested that a combination of case study and grounded theory could be particularly productive where three conditions (adapted from Benbasat et al (1987)) are met:

1. The research can study a natural setting, learn the state of the art, and generate theories from practice.
2. The researcher can answer questions that lead to an understanding of the nature and complexity of the processes taking place.
3. It is to research a previously little studied area.

These insights informed the whole research design, and the conditions apply equally to the student leadership strand of enquiry. The research methodology adopted a programme of interviews with heads and other leaders, combined with a series of focus groups with staff, students and parents for triangulation so as to ensure the views of leaders were subject to wider validation. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for meaning. In addition, surveys, designed using adaptation from the UK Social Capital Framework (Harper and Kelly 2003) and Goddard's (2003) Social Capital Scale from America, attempted to track attitudinal change more widely. All were repeated across the two years. In year two, because of emerging findings, student interviews and focus groups centred on the role of student leaders. Each group of student leaders was interviewed at the beginning and end of the year, as was the member of staff responsible for this work.

The three schools

Ashtree School (all names are pseudonyms) serves a deprived, fragmented and ill-defined community on the outskirts of a large city. In the words of the head (AH):

We don't have a village centre, or a set of shops, or a church, or anything that clearly defines community. Our parents and children don't have that in their own lives either.

Ashtree is a medium-sized 11-16 school. Most students are of White British heritage, but the number who speak English as an additional language has been increasing rapidly. The proportion of students with special educational needs and the percentage known to be eligible for free school meals are above average. There are very high levels of pupil mobility. Following a long period of local authority concern, the school was re-launched with a new head and a new name in 2006. It is currently rated satisfactory under the old OFSTED Framework, but achievement is now rising and above floor targets.

Birchgrove School serves a very different community. Built and opened in 2006 as a new town development, it does not yet have an established community. But its intake from around the city can broadly be described as middle class. Most students are of White British heritage, with about a quarter from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of students with special educational needs or disabilities is in line with the national average. It has grown every year since opening with just Y7-8 students, and now has 1500 students including post 16 provision.

The present head (BH) came in 2009 and has moved the school towards outstanding under the old inspection criteria. It became a new-style academy in 2011. BH was appointed with awareness from governors of their need to improve parental engagement, but he has since extended this to a much broader concept of community engagement based on a view about the competencies and attributes young people need to survive in a global economy in the future and how they are best developed. The development of student leadership is central to this vision.

Chestnut Academy started from the lowest and most difficult base of the three. It serves a predominantly white working class social housing estate with high levels of unemployment and a poor local reputation. The academy was opened in September 2010 to replace one of the worst performing schools in the country in terms of examination results. Student numbers had dwindled to around 400, all aged 11-16 years. A new head (CH) had been appointed from outside the school and area the previous March, but to work with the existing staff of the old school, and, unbeknown to her at the time, a very significant budget deficit.

The interim findings

In this section each of the two main research questions relating to student leadership is considered in turn in the light of the case study findings.

1. How have the three heads sought to develop their vision of student leadership?

It is clear that in each school it is the head who is the instigator and champion of the student leadership approach taken and the philosophy behind it. This is in line with the Australian findings of Lavery and Hine (2012), who see the role of the school principal as key to such development. Each of the three heads in different ways sought to modify or fundamentally change existing practice in their school as part of their wider improvement strategy. In this they were all seeking to move beyond the basic model of a school council common in many schools. As a result, each school has adopted its own approach to student leadership, with both similarities and differences, as shown in Table 2.

	Ashtree	Birchgrove	Chestnut
Organisational Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student senate • Members host house groups • Weekly meeting during tutor time • Replaced previous school council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive committee of older students • Working groups, chaired by exec. • Reps from each tutor group meet by year groups during assembly • Development of previous school council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student leadership team mirrors roles in adult leadership team, with direct individual link • Lunch-time meeting • Replaced previous prefect system
Roles undertaken by students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys of student opinion • Mediation and restorative justice • Direct organisation of community events • Representation of school at community meetings • Presentations to and work in local primary schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representative of tutor group. • Involvement in working groups that mirror staff groups/school strategic themes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team plan, plus each member has individual targets and performance review
Staff support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported by a part-time non-teacher with background in community development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead member of staff given small timetable remission • Form tutor (variable support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistant Principal works with the team to support them as a group • Mentoring through link SLT member
Appointment process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mix of application and invitation to apply and interview by staff and current senate members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected by tutor groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By application and interview – in first year by external business interviewers, in second year by current post-holders
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public speaking skills • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None identified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Off-site leadership training – 3 days
Scale of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 students directly – 3 per year group • Y11 excluded because of perceived exam pressure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four students per tutor group – around 80 in total • Other opportunities – classroom ambassadors, enterprise group (40 students for limited time period) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17 students directly, all year groups

Table 2: Schools' approaches to student leadership

AH decided in 2010 the existing school council was not working effectively, and replaced it with what was termed the student senate. Students chose to apply for the role of senate member, or were, in some cases, encouraged to apply. They are now appointed after interview jointly by staff and current members. However it was clear from their stories that it was not just what might be termed conforming or well-behaved students who came through this process. A number of those interviewed talked about past behaviour problems they had been helped to overcome. But it is certainly true that the number of students involved overall is relatively small, and also that they come from Y7-Y10, as the school felt exam pressures were too important, in the context of the school's situation, for older students to be distracted by this work.

BH had been working to increase the engagement of the existing school council which has representatives elected by each tutor group, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm. To this end, he involved council members in the four strategic staff working groups he had set up to support the school strategic plan put in place soon after he took up post. The four groups address standards, innovation, personalisation and partnership.

In this way BH looked to move student voice away from more peripheral issues to central areas of school development. An executive committee of older students now coordinates these groups overall and its members chair group meetings. Numbers involved are greater than at Ashtree, even allowing for the size of school, and BH is now keen to find ways to extend a much broader range of opportunities for leadership across the student body.

CH in her first year adopted an inherited prefect system before rejecting it and replacing it with a new structure, the Student Academy Leadership Team (SALT). Each SALT member has a role paralleled with the school senior leadership team, and each senior leader works with their student counterpart, partly as coach and mentor and partly on common agendas. Like the adult leadership team, SALT has both team and individual plans that members shape and they follow staff performance management practice. CH described the thinking behind making this change:

We show them how we do our jobs and how we lead. So the student principal and I meet and talk about how you create a cohesive team from a disparate group of people, how you get people to buy into it, how, when things aren't going as you planned, or when things are in crisis, you get people back to thinking about core values.

The first SALT group went through an application and interview process, against job descriptions, which was carried out by a local business organisation. A further feature was investment in leadership training for appointed students, buying in professional, adult-derived programmes. This intense focus on building leadership capability included explicitly the scope to challenge the school leadership using evidence and argument. Again, student numbers involved initially are relatively small, about 5% of the student body. Interviews for the second cohort were due to take place soon after the second research visit. The number and nature of roles was being expanded, and the numbers interested in applying had grown dramatically from the first year.

In all three cases, each head needed, along with their own commitment, the involvement of other staff to take this initiative forward. In all three cases, this was someone selected or identified by the head, not always an established teacher but someone they saw as a key agent for wider change.

A recurrent theme in interviewing those staff leading this work, whether their background was in teaching or not, was their assessment of the distinctive skills required of adults, themselves included, to help students develop in this way. They perceived these as quite different from those normally required of a classroom teacher, and spoke of the tensions their work sometimes caused with their colleagues.

The nature of this difference is linked to the role of facilitator, identifying when and how to give up control, but on a constantly shifting basis. It was best summarised by the coordinator at Ashtree. She described her role in relation to the senate as one of facilitation, before adding that she was still learning the art.

I tend to veer on telling them what to do too much, not getting that balance of being able to say “OK, right now, for this two minutes, they’re ready to run with it” and then maybe two minutes later having to be quite directive. So it’s having those skills to sit on your hands, stop telling them what to do, but also making sure they’re successful and the projects work, because if you just let them fail, then they won’t try again.

A young teacher early in her career had recently taken over responsibility at Birchgrove. She shares a similar vision of facilitation to the one described at Ashtree and was clearly aware of the sensitivities and tensions in her role.

When I took over I was very much of the opinion that I wanted it to be run by students. I felt it was important because it’s the students’ voice, and teachers interpret what students say perhaps not as a student means it. If it’s done in student-speak, by students, I felt that was important.

The skills and insights inherent in these two views appear crucial to successfully navigating the tensions identified in the literature review.

2. *What effects does the development of student leadership have?*

There are two potential areas of effect for student leadership; the effect of student leaders on others, both within and beyond the school, and the effect of the experience on student leaders themselves. It was only possible within the scope of this research to consider both of these from the viewpoint of the students involved, cross-checking these with the views put forward by school leaders. The research design could not allow the possibility of seeking out what Fielding and Rudduck (2002) called the ‘*silent voices*’, those who, by choice or not, were not part of that circle. However the survey evidence from students, as well as the focus group evidence from staff, gave grounds to think there were those in both groups with reservations or resentment:

They get to see more of the head than we do. (Staff member, Birchgrove)

Only the student leaders find out what's going on in the school. (Student, Ashtree)

Notwithstanding those limitations, and whilst it was not possible to test out the objectivity of their views, it does seem significant, firstly, that every student leader interviewed was able to point to some personal development as a result of their experience. It could be possible the sample made available by the schools, within the constraints of availability, timetables and examinations, was biased towards more enthusiastic students. Nevertheless, in each case a significant proportion of potential interviewees was seen, 25% at Ashtree and around 60% at Chestnut, although the proportion, not the number, at Birchgrove was smaller (about 12% in all). It is also clear a number of those interviewed, in all three schools, were not simply traditionally well-behaved, conforming students.

It is beyond the scope of this research to attempt any linkage, causal or otherwise, between involvement in student leadership and academic success, either for individuals or schools. But each head defined their purposes in developing their stakeholder engagement strategy, and student leadership within that, in terms that begin with their students and the educational outcomes for them. However, they also defined these outcomes in much broader terms than current measures of purely academic attainment. The various terms in which they expressed this, again showing both commonality and distinctive emphases, are shown in Table 3. All are connected by ideas of self-esteem and of building relationships with adults.

AH	BH	CH
Understanding of adult world	Employability	Confidence
Development of social and emotional intelligence	Enterprise	Opportunity for role and responsibility

Table 3: Language used by heads to describe desired outcomes

	Ashtree	Birchgrove	Chestnut
Student-identified effects on school/others 2011-12	Changing peoples' opinion of school for better Giving community more insight into school Organisation of student survey Community befriending scheme Organised community Fun Day on school site	Changes to uniform Changes to school organization Help to appoint new Vice-Principal	Improved relationships and trust within academy Planning a vending machine and shop Application for laptop funding
Student-identified benefits for self	Confidence Improved behavior Ability to make relationships Speaking in public	Speaking to groups Decision-making Political awareness Determination	Confidence Dealing with stress Tolerance, and understanding of people, including teachers Working as a team

Table 4: Benefits identified by student leaders

Interview examples:

What annoyed me was a lot of the people who go on about this school is rubbish have never actually been here so they don't know what it's like. I wanted to make some changes and work with the community so people can see that, yes, this school does have problems, but it's not as bad as people think. I think it's working. We've got much higher opinions of us. Students are took into account about the community. Down the Hill last year, everyone used to throw apples to cause trouble, but now we've been there and spread the word to students, it's not

been as bad, and our Police Community Support Officer has come and helped us on that. (Y9 Student, Ashtree)

I'm not afraid to say that I wasn't the easiest person to have in a classroom when I was younger. But through (the leadership work I've done) it's given me a second chance and let people look at me twice and realise I'm not that person. I've really changed a lot since I joined this school and I think that's down to them, the way my character has been built up. The fact I can go from being trouble to being Student Principal shows the encouragement I've had has helped me to progress and hopefully develop who I am. (Y12 Student, Birchgrove)

All the kids muck around in school because they don't like some staff, like Miss T. But through SALT ... I had a meeting with Miss T once when I was doing the charity events, and we didn't just have a basic conversation on that, we ended up talking lady to girl. It was work to work, basically a friend to friend. Then after you've had conversations based on work, and then moved into something else other than work, you know that Miss T and some other teachers aren't actually that bad, and you develop a good relationship with them and you feel like it's out of order when everyone starts saying stuff. (Y10 Student, Chestnut)

There is a strong echo between some of these aims and the language used by students to express their view of what they felt had been the impact for them. Key words include confidence, relationships, tolerance, and team work, or, in other words, relationships and self-esteem again. They all point to changes in their schools they believe they have effected. At Ashtree in particular the effect is also beginning to extend beyond the school into students' own wider communities.

Thomson (2012) reports similar findings about learning outcomes from student leaders in another context, but notes how little work has been undertaken to assess the learning gains from student voice and leadership and to involve students in this process. That would be true in these schools too. Addressing this gap may be central now to finding a new balance between the functional and the personal, to use Fielding's terms.

Where the students expressed with the greatest force and passion the impact they felt they had made and had experienced in themselves, at Chestnut, it may be significant this school

had invested significantly in leadership development training for those students, using adult-derived models and off-site locations. The model of shadowing and being mentored by senior leaders in the school also kept a real focus on leadership rather than passivity or compliance. When CH was asked what would happen, in practice, if students disagreed with a direction being taken by their mentor, she replied:

I quite like a bit of disagreement. If you're disagreeing about values or vision then there's something really healthy in that discussion. If there's fundamental disagreement, you get them to go away and undertake a piece of research — 'okay, if you think you're right, come back and show me, give me the evidence'. That's what I'd do with an adult leader, if one of my leadership team disagrees with me. I think the same should apply to students.

This attitude and understanding may represent a key differentiator in the development of a 'person-centred' organisation as opposed to a merely 'high-performing' one (Fielding 2006). It was also starting to affect the understanding of other school leaders. For instance, a new assistant headteacher, speaking eight weeks after her arrival from a leadership post in another school designated by OFSTED as outstanding, said:

In other schools I've had student leadership in the sense of giving them responsibility, but I realise now (after being here) it was mostly operational not strategic. The guidance we were giving was on an operations basis, not about them thinking modelling, challenging, doing ... actually being leaders. So I wonder whether some schools think they're doing it, whereas in reality they're just directing, task-orientated.

Robinson and Taylor (2013), based on a study of two student voice projects in schools, question whether it is at all possible that "*staff and students can meet as genuine partners with a shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together*" (p.44). However, the potential for transformation in the three case studies does not come from school leaders simply listening to suggestions from students for changes they think might be beneficial, nor

in simply coopting some students to act as proxies for school leaders. Rather it seems to lie in the relationships with teachers and other adults that develop as a result of sharing concerns, and the way in which mutual respect and understanding increases through shared responsibility. This is well illustrated by the Chestnut student, cited in the interview examples, discussing her changed attitude to Miss T. Her comments do not suggest ‘*synthetic trust*’ (Czerniawski 2012). They have resonance with the findings of Mitra (2009) relating to the significance of youth-adult relationships and of Moloi et al (2010) regarding mutual trust between students and teachers as a key driver of improvement. They are perhaps offering a glimpse of the essence and beginning of transformation.

Conclusion

The research evidence gathered so far suggests the possibility of a significant reciprocal relationship between the development of student leadership, with its dual characteristics of agency for change and community engagement, as opposed to simpler understandings of student voice, and the wider growth of trust and engagement in a school, which may in turn be linked with potential for transformation.

It remains true that, while all three schools involved students from a wide age range, not just the oldest, and from a range of backgrounds, the number of students involved as leaders in each school is relatively small. One of the challenges confronting each head is, if there are real personal development benefits for individuals and for the school, how they extend these to a much greater number of students, and ultimately to all.

All student leaders reported that they developed a range of skills including confidence, presentation, working with people, and understanding of decision-making and group processes, but there is as yet no mechanism for capturing and recognising this learning. The strongest impact appears to occur where there are clear roles and a strong focus on leadership development and coaching for students involved, and this investment may be a critical factor for success.

But the most critical success factor is perhaps the recognition that fostering of genuine student leadership, as opposed to simply on ‘*an operations basis*’, requires distinctive support, skills and judgment from adults, which are not the same as those normally associated with classroom teaching. Understanding these skills and developing them, whilst addressing the tensions that will flow if other staff do not also understand them, at the same time

acknowledging with insightful sensitivity the inescapable presence of a power dimension, may be the next key challenges for this work.

Clearly this is, at this stage of the research, a partial and preliminary view. It opens up lines for further enquiry and more extensive study over time to develop fuller understanding of the processes at work, of the real possibility and impact of student leadership in terms of transformation, and of its wider implications both for school leadership and for teaching and learning.

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