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## Sound, Presence, and Power: "Student Voice" in Educational Research and Reform

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**Sound, Presence, and Power:  
“Student Voice” in Educational Research and Reform**

**Alison Cook-Sather**

Every way of thinking is both premised on and generative of a way of naming that reflects particular underlying convictions. Over the last fifteen years, a way of thinking has re-emerged that strives to reposition school students in educational research and reform.<sup>i</sup> Best documented in Australia, Canada, England, and the United States, this way of thinking is premised on the following convictions: that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education.<sup>ii</sup> As will become apparent as this discussion unfolds, one of the challenges of analyzing this re-emergent way of thinking is that words and phrases such as “attention,” “response,” and “actively shape” mean different things to different people. And yet a single term has emerged to signal a range of efforts that strive to redefine the role of students in educational research and reform: “student voice.”

“Student voice” has accumulated what Hill (2003) describes as “a new vocabulary—a set of terms that are necessary to encode the meaning of our collective project.” These terms strive to name the values that underlie “student voice” as well as the approaches signaled by the term. Like any attempt at such encoding, however, an effort to identify a new vocabulary that captures the attitudes and practices associated with student voice work raises questions, especially because it makes use of already common terms, albeit in new contexts and in new ways. These questions prompt us to re-examine the terms we think capture our commitments as well as those commitments themselves. Such a re-examination is critical, particularly in regard to terms we think we understand. Indeed, the word “term” itself is defined as a word or phrase referring to a clear and definite conception, and yet despite its increasing and emphatic use, none such clear and definite conception exists for “student voice.”

In an attempt both to clarify and to complicate current understandings of “student voice,” I organize this discussion as follows: I trace the emergence of the term; I explore positive and

negative aspects of the term, some of which are identified in the research literature and some of which I offer from my own perspective; I identify two underlying premises of student voice work signaled by two particular words—“rights” and “respect”—that surface repeatedly in publications on student voice efforts; and I focus on a word that also appears regularly in the research literature but that refers to a wide range of practices: “listening.” The first two subsections are intended to offer an overview of how the term “student voice” came to enter our discourse and to bring together in a single discussion some of the positive and negative associations with the term. The subsequent sections, in which I take a close look at three associated terms, are not intended to provide a complete lexicon associated with student voice work; rather, my aim is to illuminate some of the premises shared by researchers and practitioners concerned with this work as well as to highlight some of the different perspectives, commitments, and approaches of those whose work is aggregated under the term. Taken together, the various parts of this discussion will, I hope, help us map where we have come from with “student voice” work, where we currently find ourselves, and where we might go next in our efforts to name and act upon our convictions regarding the repositioning of students in educational research and reform.

Before I embark on this discussion, I want to emphasize that this paper is an exploration of the *term* “student voice” as it is evoked and applied in the educational research literature; it is not an exhaustive exploration of the practices associated with the term. Thus, while my discussion raises questions about how attitudes toward and commitments to student voice work play out, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address all those questions.<sup>iii</sup> Furthermore, I want to acknowledge that I analyze the term “student voice” not only as an advocate of efforts to reposition students in educational research and reform but also as a participant in such efforts who at the same time recognizes the potential dangers of both these efforts and the term currently used to describe them. I concur with Fielding’s assertion that “there are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together” (Fielding, 2004a, p. 309), and thus that student voice efforts, “however committed they may be, will not of themselves achieve their aspirations unless a series of conditions are met that provide the organisational structures and cultures to make their desired intentions a living reality” (Fielding, 2004b, p. 202). In light of

Fielding's caution, I wish to stress that any illumination of the attitudes and practices associated with student voice work must be seen as a work-in-progress, another step in an ongoing struggle to find meeting places for teachers and students and for researchers and students from which to effect cultural shifts that support a repositioning of students.

### **The Emergence of the Term “Student Voice” in Educational Research and Reform**

In the early 1990s, a number of educators and social critics noted the exclusion of student voices from conversations about learning, teaching, and schooling, called for a rethinking of this exclusion, and began to take steps toward redressing it. In the U.S., Kozol wrote that “the voices of children...have been missing from the whole discussion” of education and educational reform (1992, p. 5), and Weis and Fine invited “the voices of children and adolescents who have been expelled from the centers of their schools and the centers of our culture [to] speak” (1993, p. 2). In Canada, Fullan asked, “What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?” (1991, p. 170), and Levin (1994) argued that the most promising reform strategies involved treating students as capable persons, capitalizing on their knowledge and interests, and involving them in determining goals and learning methods. Likewise, in the U.K., early champions of student voice work, such as Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace (1996), who followed in the spirit of Stenhouse (1975, 1983), argued for the inclusion of students’ perspectives in conversations about school improvement, even if “student voice has not been seen as a vote winner by governments” (Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace, 1996, p. 276) and other powerful, decision-making bodies. Writing in Australia, Danaher (1994) captured the call to listen to student voices succinctly: “Instead of treating school students as voices crying in the wilderness, we would be far better served if we asked the voices’ owners what they think and listened actively to the answers” (quoted in Youens & Hall, 2004). The terms we see gathering here—“opinion,” “matter,” “capable,” “listen actively,” and “involve”—are among those that constitute the “new vocabulary” that “encode[s] the meaning of our collective project” (Hill, 2003). While these terms do not admit of easy or straightforward definitions, they challenge dominant images of students as silent, passive recipients of what others define as education (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001; Cook-Sather, 2003).

In the late 1990s and the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many of the educational research and reform efforts that have unfolded in Australia, Canada, England, and the United States that “encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action on matters that primarily concern students, but also, by implication, school staff and the communities they serve” (Fielding & McGregor, 2005) have been encompassed by the term “student voice” (see also Bradley, Deighton, & Selby, 2004, and Johnson, 1991). During this time, the advent of the term “student voice” and its entry into the discourse of educational research and reform begins to point the way toward, if not start to effect, a cultural shift—a retuning of ears and a rearrangement of players and processes of research and reform (see Cook-Sather, forthcoming). Attending to the voices of students who drop out of or leave school in Australia, Smyth (forthcoming) presents us with students’ critiques of and recommendations for schooling, and he argues that any school reform effort must be undertaken “in ways that honor the voices of the young” (see also Smyth et al., 2004). Some school reform efforts in the U.S. strive to enact such an honoring of the voices of the young not only by attending to students’ words but also by putting students in the position of “translating [other] student explanations [of why they struggle in school] into language that adults would understand” (Mitra, forthcoming). And writing about one reform effort in Canada, Pekrul and Levin (2005) contend that, “The voices of students may provide the tipping point to shift the culture and practices of high schools.” But what does “voice” here mean? And what kind of shift in school and research culture and practices would be necessary not only to accommodate but, further, to reposition students in educational research and reform in ways such as Mitra describes as well as in other ways?

As the vocabulary evoked in relation to the term suggests, “voice” signals having a legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/or having an active role “in decisions about and implementation of educational policies and practice” (Holdsworth, 2000, p. 355). How voice is defined depends in part on the relationship that exists in a particular context between “voice” and “agency” or “action” (Holdsworth, 2000, p. 357). An allusion to the literal absence of student voices from discussions of educational policy and practice, “voice” also asks us to understand sound, specifically speaking, as representative of presence, participation, and power of individuals and/or of a collective and, in particular, to understand all of these in terms of relationship—to other people, to institutions, to practices. Thus “student voice” as a

term asks us to connect the sound of students speaking not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence but also with their having the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools.

Having a voice—having presence, power, and agency—within democratic, or at least voting, contexts means having the opportunity to speak one’s mind, be heard and counted by others, and, perhaps, to have an influence on outcomes. As Shannon (1993) puts it, “Voice is the tool by which we make ourselves known, name our experience, and participate in decisions that affect our lives” (p. 91, quoted in Nagle, 2001, p. 10). But it is not as straightforward as an individual simply speaking words. Contributing an overtly auditory term to the vocabulary associated with student voice, Arnot et al. (2001) ask: “In the acoustic of the school whose voice gets listened to?” (quoted in Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003, p. 278). Whether acknowledged or not, “issues of voice...are embedded in historically located structures and relations of power. ‘Who is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said; in fact what is said turns out to change according to who is speaking and who is listening’” (Alcoff in Fielding, 2004a, p. 300). Fielding (2004b) vividly illustrates how the term “voice” signals power dynamics and kinds of participation: “The stentorian tones of middle class ‘voice’ dominate the monologue of the ‘big conversation’ and the dismantling privilege of ‘choice’ renders inaudible the increasingly alien discourse of social justice and basic humanity” (p. 198). Here more words emerge as connected to the term “student voice”: “make ourselves known,” “participate,” “conversation”; and others that begin to critically analyze the term: “historically located structures,” “relations of power.” “Student voice,” in its most profound and radical form, calls for a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students.

Because voice is for some “synonymous with people simply expressing their point of view on a subject” but is for others “a much more involved act of participation where people engage with the organisations, structures and communities that shape their lives” (Hadfield & Haw, 2001, p. 488) and “generate knowledge” that is both “valuable and might form a basis for action” (Atweh & Burton, 1995, p. 562), there can be no simple, fixed definition or explication of the term. Advocates generally agree that “student voice” is “an increasingly important element in understanding teaching and schooling more generally,” (McCallum et al., 2000, p. 276), but

again, how that understanding is achieved and what is done in response or with it vary considerably. It is in part an issue of scale as well as definition: As Bragg (forthcoming) suggests, “Now that [student voice] is being adapted and realised in a range of contexts, for various purposes, one can no longer think of it as one enterprise or endeavour only.” The terms associated with it that I have highlighted so far confirm this point. A consideration of the positive and negative aspects of the term that have emerged as its use has expanded further illuminates both the shared and the different commitments associated with the term and provides a frame for my exploration of the premises that underlie its multiple uses and some of the practices it encompasses.

### **Positive and Negative Aspects of “Student Voice”**

Those of us who use “student voice” to capture the range of activities that strive to reposition students in educational research and reform are not the first to use the ‘voice’ part of the term. It surfaces in various realms, most notably English teaching, and Kamler’s (2003) critical reflection on the use of the term “voice” in teaching writing throws into relief some of the benefits and drawbacks of the term as applied to practices and research with students discussed here. As Kamler (2003) points out, voice has been “a persistent and recurrent metaphor in English teaching” since the 1980s, central both to writing process pedagogies and to critical and emancipatory pedagogies (p. 34). While she sees as laudable the main impetus behind calls for student voice in writing—the desire for student engagement, communication, and personal knowing—Kamler suggests that voice may be the wrong term to use as a guide in pursuing these qualities in teaching writing. In support of this contention, she cites Gilbert’s (1989) warning: the metaphor of voice obscures “the difference between the writer (she who writes) and the text (that which is written); text becomes synonymous with student writer, and writing is regarded as a ‘transparent medium through which the “person behind the text” can be seen’ (Gilbert, 1989, p. 22)” (Kamler, 2003, p. 34). In addition to warning against the conflation of writer and text, Kamler cites Lensmire’s distinction between voice as individual expression (as advocated by writing process pedagogies) and voice as participation (as advocated by critical theorists) as an important warning neither to conflate nor to entirely separate the personal and the political. And finally, she cites post-structural feminist scholars’ arguments that voice does not acknowledge

the complexities of individuals' subjectivities, of context, and of relations of power and domination.

This critical analysis of "voice" as it applies to the teaching of writing throws into relief what is both potentially useful and potentially problematic about the term for signaling the range of commitments and approaches that have gathered under "student voice" in educational research and reform. Specifically, Kamler's argument for the reason *not* to use voice as a metaphor in writing both supports some of the reasons why not to use the term in discussions of educational research and reform *and* one of the reasons to use it: the connection between voice and person, between voice and body. Although Kamler's and others' warnings against particular understandings and uses of voice are valid—warnings about constructing voice as equal to an individual, as single and uncomplicated, as given rather than constructed in relationship—because student voice work in educational research and reform *is* still about bodily presence and participation, as well as, sometimes, about written texts, it is worth considering retaining as well as critiquing the term.

Kamler's review of critical perspectives on the use of voice in teaching writing echoes many of the points I raised in my review of various efforts in the United States to authorize students' perspectives on school (Cook-Sather, 2002b). At that time, I framed my argument for student voice in positive terms, suggesting that in our research and teaching we build on the following: century-old constructivist approaches to education, which argue that students need to be authors of their own understanding and assessors of their own learning; the commitment of critical pedagogy to redistribute power not only within the classroom, between teacher and students, but also in society at large; postmodern feminist critiques of the workings and re-workings of power, taking small steps toward changing oppressive practices but also continually questioning our motives and practices in taking these steps; educational researchers' efforts to include student voices in larger conversations about educational policy and practice; social critics' efforts to illuminate what is happening and what could be happening within classrooms in ways that the wider public can hear and take seriously; and finally, the commitment of a small but growing constituency that advocates including students', as well as adults', frames of reference in conversations about educational policy and practice. At this point, I use Kamler's and my own arguments as a starting point to review the positive and the negative aspects of

“student voice” as they are articulated in the research literature and as I see them. This review highlights from a different angle the cultural shift necessary for and repositioning of students in educational research and reform.

### **Positive Aspects of “Student Voice”**

Like advocates of voice in writing who are looking for student engagement, advocates of student voice in educational research and reform embrace the term because speaking does generally signal presence, involvement, and commitment. Whether expressing support or dissent, affirming existing ideas or proposing others, a student voice speaking alone or in dialogue always signals some kind of engagement (again, what kind is not as easy to discern). The positive aspects of student voice identified in the research literature highlight how student presence and involvement within conversations and efforts that have traditionally been the purview of adults has the potential to effect a cultural shift in educational research and reform.

One of the most profound, positive aspects of the term—and one of the clearest indicators of the beginning of a cultural shift—is its insistence on altering dominant power imbalances between adults and young people. In Oldfather’s words, “Learning from student voices...requires major shifts on the part of teachers, students, and researchers in relationships and in ways of thinking and feeling about the issues of knowledge, language, power, and self” (1995, p. 87). Such a shift requires those of us currently in positions of power to confront “the power dynamics inside and outside our classrooms [that make] democratic dialogue impossible” (Ellsworth, 1992, p. 107) and to strive to use our power “in an attempt (that might not be successful) to help others exercise power” (Gore, 1992, p. 59).

Changing the power dynamics between adults and young people within and beyond classrooms creates the possibility for students to embrace “the political potential of speaking out on their own behalf” (Lewis, 1993, p. 44) and, beyond taking their place “in whatever discourse is essential to action,” being afforded the right to have their part matter (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 18). When students speak out on their own behalf, and when what they say matters—indeed, shapes action—student voice becomes “the initiating force in an enquiry process which invites teachers’ involvement as facilitating and enabling partners in learning” (Fielding, 2004b, p. 201) rather

than keeping students in the role of recipient or victim of teachers' (and administrators' and policymakers') decision-making processes.

These shifts in power dynamics between adults and young people and in roles for students are both prerequisites and results of the key premises and practices of student voice work that I explore in detail in subsequent sections, but I want also to mention each of these positive aspects here. As Heilbrun's (1988) point throws into relief, taking one's place in the discourse that is essential to action is only significant if one also is afforded the right to have one's part matter. Thus, another positive aspect of student voice work is that it acknowledges and argues for students' rights as active participants—as citizens—in school and beyond it. As Rudduck (forthcoming) explains, it was this concern about students' rights that “sparked a new student voice movement.” Both Rudduck and Thomson (forthcoming) argue that the rights of students to have a voice is connected to citizenship education, and citing Wyn (1995), Thomson argues that young people are in fact already citizens “whose rights to participate in decisions that affect them are daily violated in schools.” Likewise, Pollard, Thiessen, and Filer (1997), in prefacing their edited collection of chapters focused on student voice work in Canada, the UK, and the U.S., claim that “children are citizens who arguably have as much right to consideration as any other individual” (p. 2).

Another positive aspect of “student voice” connected to one of the key terms I explore in a subsequent section is that it facilitates students feeling “respected and engaged in the classroom” (What Kids Can Do, 2003, p. 6). Such respect promotes more constructive participation; it creates relationships within which teachers and students can communicate with and learn from one another. Discussing why better communication among teachers and students at his urban public high school might make students less likely to cut class, Maurice Baxter, an African-American senior, explains: “You can't have good communication without respect. If I don't respect you, we can't communicate” (Sanon et al., 2001). Lawrence-Lightfoot highlights the teacher's role in this dynamic: “Respect: To get it, you must give it” (2000, p. 22; see also Cook-Sather, 2002a). The centrality of respect for students as knowers and actors is another positive aspect of the term that contributes to the possibility of a cultural shift in educational research and reform.

A final positive aspect of “student voice,” which is closely connected to each of the previous aspects I have discussed, is that it insists that if students speak, adults must listen. Constructivist, critical, multicultural, and anti-racist pedagogies emphasize the importance of listening, arguing that teachers can improve their practice by listening closely to what students have to say about their learning (Commeyras, 1995; Dahl; 1995; Duckworth, 1987; Heshusius; 1995; Johnston & Nicholls, 1995; Lincoln, 1995; Rodgers, 2006; Schultz, 2003), that listening to students and building teaching around themes that are relevant to and that emerge from students’ own lives can be transformative both personally and politically (Freire, 1990; McLaren, 1989; Shor, 1987, 1992), and that listening to students can counter discriminatory and exclusionary tendencies in education (Banks, 1996; hooks; 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000). Such arguments suggest that school reform efforts focus on creating a listening culture and that educational research strive to redefine listening (Cook-Sather, forthcoming; Mitra, forthcoming; Thorkildsen, forthcoming).

### **Negative Aspects of “Student Voice”**

The negative aspects of student voice identified in the research literature highlight how student presence and involvement within conversations and efforts that have traditionally been the purview of adults can work against the cultural shift in educational research and reform for which advocates argue.

One such negative aspect of the term is its seeming monolithic quality—that there is a single student voice (Lodge, personal communication). Like feminists who warn against “claims to universal truths and...assumptions of a collective experience of oppression” (Weiler, 1991, p. 450), those who assert the importance of student voice as a uniform and united entity run the risk of overlooking essential differences among students, their perspectives, and their needs. It is hard work not to reduce students’ comments and insights to any “single, uniform and invariable experience” (Silva & Rubin, 2003, p. 2). It is also hard work to avoid making the mistake of “uncritically ‘essentialising’ [student] experiences by assuming that they are free to represent their own interests transparently (Spivak, 1988)” (Cruddas, 2001, p. 63; Raider-Roth, 2005).

A concern among some advocates of student voice work regards the possibility that the oversimplification of the issues involved in changing school culture to make it more responsive

to students will lead to tokenism, manipulation, and practices not matching rhetoric (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Fielding, 2004a and 2004b; Holdsworth, 2000, 1986; Lodge, 2005; Thomson & Gunter, 2005). There is the potential, some theorists warn, for efforts that are “benign but condescending” or “cynical and manipulative” (Fielding, 2004b, p. 200), that keep students passive, their voices “only audible through the products of past performance” (Fielding, 2004b, p. 201).

There is also the danger of indulgence that ultimately leads to dismissal, a result of a romantic view of children. As Pollard, Thiessen, and Filer (1997) put it, the “aren’t they sweet” attitude “reflects the patronage of adults, but it does not contribute to understanding or analysis of the issues and concerns which are of importance to pupils” (p. 2). An equally demeaning form of attention to student voices is seeing them as decorations. As Fine and her colleagues (forthcoming) explain, their email inboxes are “a virtual catalogue of invitations [from researchers, publishers, and policy makers] to ‘gather student voices’ as if they were Christmas tree decorations on an already pre-determined reform ‘for their own good.’”

Furthermore, there is the danger of even well-intentioned student voice initiatives: Some efforts to “increase student voice and participation can actually reinforce a hierarchy of power and privilege among students and undermine attempted reforms” (Silva, 2001, p. 98). Orner (1992) cautions against this tendency in general, warning that calls for student voice as a central component of student empowerment perpetuate “relations of domination in the name of liberation” because they do not sufficiently consider the intersection of identity, language, context, and power that inform all pedagogical relations (p. 75).

Another potentially negative aspect of student voice work is that it presents challenges that some may not be willing to face, particularly listening to things we don’t want to hear. It is very difficult to learn from voices we don’t want to hear (Bragg, 2001; Johnston & Nicholls, 1995) and to learn to hear the voices we don’t know how to hear: “Traditional epistemologies and methods grounded in white androcentric concerns, and rooted in values which are understood to be inimical to the interest of the silenced, will fail to capture the voices needed” (Lincoln quoted in Fielding, 2004a, p. 299). On the other hand, it is a challenge to create a climate that is “sufficiently politically conscious and critical” and that allows us to “resist the

temptation to glamorize student voices” because they “are likely to be deeply imbued with status quo values” (Shor cited in O’Loughlin, 1995, p. 112).

Yet another set of negative aspects concerns the use of student voice against teachers and students. In England, where student voice efforts are, arguably, most widely institutionalized because they are mandated by the government, the inspection process of the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) takes account of what students say but then sometimes uses this evidence to criticize (or praise) teachers. In addition, OFSTED has been known to exhort students to “face up to their responsibilities,” alongside teachers, to improve their schools. Related to this use of students’ voices against them are cases in which selected students have taken part in formulating school rules in school council, and the student body is then faced with a kind of moral message about keeping to the rules on the grounds that their representatives formulated them. These practices seem to invoke student voice to control both teachers and students rather than respect and honor the community of the school (Lodge, personal communication).

Using the term “voice” to represent a repositioning of students in educational research and reform also runs the risk of denying the potential power of silence and resistance. Silence can be powerful—a withholding of assent, a political act. Silence can mean that a voice is not speaking because it is not worthwhile or safe to speak—out of knowledge of one’s inability in a particular situation to transform silence into action (Lorde, 1984). It can also be an informed choice after attempting to speak and not being heard. An African-American male describes his perception of his own “voice” and voices like his, as well as voices unlike his: “We got squeaky wheels and flat tires....Some smooth white walls rollin’ their way right to college, gettin’ oil all the way. And then the rest of us...flat tires! Bumpin’ on down the road, making all sorts of crude noises. Probably fall off real soon anyway. Ain’t worth the grease” (quoted in Silva, 2001, p. 95). While the kind of silence that can result from fear, resistance, or resignation should be of concern, silence can also be full and resonant—the silence that falls “at the end / of a night through which two people / have talked till dawn” (Rich, 1984). Regardless of how silence is interpreted and addressed, it is an essential consideration in discussions of voice (Hadfield & Haw, 2001; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993).

As is clear in my discussion of the potential positive and negative aspects of the term “student voice,” issues of power, communication, and participation are central. With both the potential positive and the potential negative aspects of the term in mind, I turn now to an exploration of two premises and one set of practices reported in the research literature—an exploration that further illuminates what a cultural shift that supports a repositioning of students might look like. Where possible, I use brief quotations from students to open my discussion of each section to illustrate that these issues are ones that students themselves identify, not only ones that advocates of student voice work embrace.

### **Premises Underlying Student Voice Work**

The shifts in power relations, dynamics of participation, and models of action that student voice work calls for suggest that the term evokes and strives to change very basic yet contested social principles: rules and relationships and the role of the individual within the parameters of those. Two words—“rights” and “respect”—that appear repeatedly across publications focused on student voice efforts point to underlying premises upon which those efforts rest. The first of these words is foundational to the convictions of any nation that considers itself participatory. In both its more institutionalized and its more idiosyncratic iterations, the assertion of students’ rights is a call for a cultural shift away from an adult-centric, infantilizing, and disempowering set of attitudes and practices and toward a culture that supports students as among those with the right to take their place “in whatever discourse is essential to action” and the right to have their part matter (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 18).

### **Rights**

Although widely evoked in publications focused on student voice work, “rights” is a word not clearly defined, like many words that come to stand for guiding premises. It is also, tellingly, not a word that students use with any frequency about their experiences. It appeals to higher ethical and moral principles such as justice and equity and, ostensibly, suggests a certain inalienable quality. There is an inherent contradiction in such appeals, however, in that particular groups of people designate and remove their own and others’ rights repeatedly over time, and it is in part this contradiction that raises questions for those who wonder about the

potential dangers and drawbacks of the term “student voice.”

In the U.K., several discussions of rights point to international resolutions and national mandates that have been taken up and embodied in particular ways by researchers and reformers. Focusing on an international resolution passed in 1989, Lodge (2005) explains: “Among other things [the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child] gives young people the right to express views freely on all matters affecting them, to be heard directly or through a representative during proceedings that affect them, and that their views are given due weight, according to their age and ability.” John (1996) also took the United Nations’ Convention of the Rights of the Child as a benchmark. She entitled the first section of her book *Children in Charge* “The Right to Be Heard,” and she opens the chapter called “Voicing: Research and Practice with the ‘Silenced’” by claiming the focus of the book to be on “children’s thoughts, how we access them, how we act on them and how we honor the thinking and the thinker in our research, interventions and relationships with children” (p. 3).

National frameworks also serve as reference points for students’ right to have their voices heard. Examples of such frameworks include England’s Department of Education and Skills [DfES] consultation paper *Working Together: Giving Children and Young People a Say* [2003] or the Office for Standards in Education [OfSTED] framework *Evaluating Educational Inclusion* [2000]), which are meant to guide educational practices that are responses to international resolutions and which explicitly assert the “rights of children and young people to have a voice and an active role in decision making and planning in education” (Cruddas & Haddock, 2003, p. 5; see also Alderson, 1999; Lodge, 2005; John, 1996; Rudduck, forthcoming). As Thomson and Gunter (2005) point out, however, “Legislative framework about children’s rights [in England] is more elaborated, and professional understanding and commitments better developed, in the health and welfare systems than in education. Children and young people have more mandated rights in courts and clinics than they do in school disciplinary proceedings (Franklin, 2002; John, 2003).” I found the same to be true in my review of patients’ and clients’ rights in the U.S. medical and legal realms (Cook-Sather, 2002b). Pollard and Triggs (2000) substantiate this claim further, suggesting that in the wake of the Education Reform Act of 1988, the National Curriculum and assessment were introduced into schools in England without including young people in the deliberation process. They point out that “there was no apparent awareness in

government circles of children's rights (Alderson, 1999; Franklin, 1995)," even though it is "appropriate and necessary to ask hard questions about the consequences of the introduction of the National Curriculum from the perspective of children" if one accepts that children have "legitimate fundamental rights" (pp. 13-14).

Although framed and followed through on in different ways, there is a long history of claims to rights in the U.S. The right of all students to free public education was among Thomas Jefferson's founding ideals, and the most enduring pursuit of this ideal is credited to Horace Mann and the advent of the common school in the early to mid-1800s (see Cremin, 1961; Meier & Wood, 2004; Spring, 1994; Wood, 2004). As the population of the country increased and control over educational policy making and practice monitoring shifted from local to national forums, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the passage of federal legislation framed in terms of student rights, particularly regarding equal access to education regardless of race (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954), gender (Title IX), class (Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, including Title I), and ability (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975). The most recent federal legislation, passed in 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), is a bipartisan law that has reauthorized and also redefined the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and is "designed to change the culture of America's schools by closing the achievement gap, offering more flexibility, giving parents more options, and teaching students based on what works" (<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/index.html?src=ov> ).

While the spirit behind all of these ideals and laws was ostensibly the insurance of students' right to equal education, critics have questioned the actual results. Jefferson's "all students" did not include the children of slaves. Mann's common school, with its core curriculum, was seen by some as protecting privileged economic and religious positions in society rather than benefiting all of its members (Spring, 1994). Fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, gross inequities remain in schools across racial lines (Fine et al., 2004). Critiques of the implementation of the other major pieces of legislation are equally pointed. Nowhere is this clearer than in the reactions against No Child Left Behind, which range from criticism by educational scholars (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Kohn, 2004; Sizer, 2004) to unanimous votes not to comply with the law in Connecticut, Utah, and Jefferson's own Virginia to resistance by the nation's largest teachers' union and parent groups (Wood, 2004). The commitment to

“change the culture of America’s schools” claimed by the Bush administration in NCLB is not the same culture shift that would reposition students in ways that advocates of student voice call for.

Indeed, what is striking about all of this legislation is that student voices—students’ own words, presence, and power—are missing. This elision is consistent with the tendency for educational research to be conducted on not with students (Cook-Sather, forthcoming; Fine et al., forthcoming; Thiessen, forthcoming). It is also consistent with the tendency of both the educational system in the U.S. and that system’s every reform to focus exclusively on adults’ notions of how education should be conceptualized and practiced (Cook-Sather, 2002b). Even strong and important arguments made that students have the right to learn (e.g., Brown, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1997) focus on teachers’ or other adults’ perspectives on what students need. Thus, educational research that does not elicit or respond to students’ ideas violates students’ rights, and educational reform that does not include students in active roles reinforces the U.S. school as a locus of social control that keeps students captive either to dominant interests, notions, and practices (again, see Berman, 1984; Burbules, 1986; Cook-Sather, 2003; Franklin, 2000; Giroux, 1985; Greene, 1983; Popkewitz, 1988; Schlechty & Burke, 1980; Schutz, 2003; Thomas, 1985) or to adults’ notions of how to empower students.

The driving force behind research and reform is, it is claimed, the improvement of schools, achievement, and (sometimes) learning. The disconnect, then, between what we know and what we do, between federal law that is not accountable and local conditions that render success virtually impossible, between the espoused goal of supporting student learning and the reality of ignoring students, points to a profoundly disabling and potentially very dangerous discrepancy between the claims behind federal legislation and the policies and practices that result from it.

Perhaps because no national student voice discourses or efforts have emerged in response to federal legislation in the United States, some argue that student voice work in the U.S. is not “geared to rights and empowerment” as it had been in the past but instead has “focused on the notion that student outcomes will improve and school reform will be more successful if students actively participate in shaping it” (Mitra, 2004, p. 652). Some researchers in England offer the same critique, suggesting that “there is a marked tendency for senior policy makers [in England]

to bring ‘pupil voice’ into the policy conversation as a means of achieving school improvement and higher standards of attainment, rather than as a matter of the UN convention, citizenship and rights” (Thomson & Gunter, 2005). A focus on outcomes in the U.S. is certainly more in keeping with the implementation of No Child Left Behind, for which the criterion for success is particular scores on standardized tests, where not a student voice is heard. Indeed, some critics in the U.S. argue that legislation and the dominant ideology overall is set on systematically not only forcing students into complicity with and obedience to the standardized test but also “stupidifying” students—rendering them incapable of thought, critical reflection, or action (Kincheloe, forthcoming).

While larger policy frames exist across contexts, some educators do not evoke them and base their work on more individual assertions of young people’s rights. Writing in England, MacBeath and his colleagues assert simply: “Young people have a right to be heard” (2003, p. 2). Writing in Chile, Prieto (2001) assumes a similar stance, arguing that underlying her research was a strong belief “in the right and necessity of students speaking for themselves” (p. 88). And writing in Canada, reflecting across a variety of student voice initiatives, Thiessen (1997) suggests that acting on behalf of pupils’ perspectives is an approach embraced by “defenders of [students’] right to be individually and collectively heard—to have their voices respected, their preferences considered, their critiques engaged, and their choices matter” (p. 191). There is also work being done in the U.S. that asserts that students have the right to have their voices heard and counted (Cook-Sather, 2002b; Mitra, forthcoming; Galloway, Pope, & Osberg, forthcoming; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Yonezawa & Jones, forthcoming).

Although “rights” is not always as explicitly defined as it might be, it is clear that the term signals a premise underlying much current student voice work. Levin (2000) argues that, “Thirty years ago we missed the opportunity to use new ideas about students’ rights and roles as a way to build stronger and better schools. The opportunity to do so may now be with us again”—as a discourse of rights emerges in connection with a resurgence of interest in student voice work.

## **Respect**

Reach me with more than words from textbooks—but words from the soul and the mind connected to the heart. What got you to teach me? Wasn't it to reach me? . . . Relate to me, debate with me, respect me. Stop neglecting me.

- Strucker et al., 2001, p. 162

Although the term “respect” has come to mean many different things to different people, and it has been adopted into the popular culture to mean something quite superficial that has little to do with empathy, understanding, and genuine moral connection with others, it is, nevertheless, ubiquitous in discussions of student voice work and thus warrants exploration. While it is important to keep in mind the disparity among meanings and the potential for misunderstandings among us as we explore the term, there is no denying the power of expressions such as that of the student quoted above. The call for respect from students is loud and clear.

As with the term “rights,” the term “respect” is also sometimes linked to larger resolutions in discussions of student voice efforts: “The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by the UK in 1991) and Children Act of 1989 both signaled an increased concern for children’s welfare and respect for listening to children’s views” (Kirby, 2001, p. 76). Other times, the word appears in more local, although far-reaching, calls for profound shifts in ways of thinking without the impetus of higher resolutions: “[We need] a fundamental shift in the dominant epistemology in our society and our schools to one based on trusting, listening to, and respecting the minds of all participants in schooling” (Oldfather et al., 1999, p. 313). Similarly, Levin (1994) has argued that, “If we take seriously the idea that students are people, we must respect their ideas, opinions, and desires” (p. 97). Rudduck (2002) also suggests that, “Among the ‘conditions of learning’ in school that students identify [i.e., conditions they need in order to learn] are respect, responsibility, challenge, and support” (p. 123). And Rudduck and Demetriou (2003) found that out of 15,000 students who responded to a survey in a national newspaper in England that asked them to describe the kind of school they would like, the seventh most popular response was “a respectful school” (p. 277).

Some researchers not only evoke but also define respect as a basic premise underlying efforts to reposition students in processes of education and in research on schools. Goldman and Newman (1998) suggest that, “Respect listens to divergent opinions and looks for the merits they

possess” (p. 9). Rudduck and Flutter (2004) contend that evidence they gathered, “from diverse school settings, suggests that pupils who are involved in school and who feel they are respected as individuals and as an institutional and social group are likely to feel a greater sense of respect and belonging, and are less likely to disengage from a school’s purposes” (p. 107; see also Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Mitra, 2004, p. 662; Rudduck, 2002, p. 123). Discussing the work they have done in U.K. schools, MacBeath and his colleagues (2003) emphasize the importance of “a working relationship with pupils that is marked by openness, respect, trust” (p. 3). And Crane contends that research that provides the student body with “an opportunity to express their opinion, in the knowledge that it would be taken seriously... creates an ethos of respect” (p. 54).

Writing about a specific kind of student voice effort—the development of active citizenship through particular community projects in Australia—Thomson (forthcoming) cites Watts’ claim that “agency is about being listened to and treated with dignity, respect and mutuality,” and she quotes the teacher involved in the projects she studied as saying: “[Relationships] between teacher and student need to have boundaries set by mutual respect.” Echoing the assertion that voice is representative of presence, participation, and power either of individuals or of a collective, MacBeath (2003) and his colleagues assert that, “Being consulted can help pupils feel that they are respected as individuals and as a body within the school” (p. 1).

Levin (2000) cites both psychologists and educators to support his argument that students want and need respect. He suggests that we must “make it normal, even expected, that students would have a reasoned, informed and respected voice in school decisions.” Fine et al. (forthcoming) have “spoken with, surveyed, collaborated with and witnessed the performances of thousands of youth from across the U.S.” What they have found is that youth from urban and suburban schools, across racial and ethnic lines, and from diverse social classes and academic biographies, want, among other things, “respect, for their varied identities, and not to be judged by the color of their skin, the fashion they don, the language they speak, zip code in which they live.” Similarly, in their research in England, Cruddas and Haddock found that, “[Pupils’] views were not respected by adults...” (2003, p. 6) and that if that lack of respect didn’t change, then schooling experiences for students couldn’t improve. Corroborating all these claims, a high school student in the northeastern United States, clearly drawing on her own experience of being disrespected, explains in very direct and clear terms: “I hate it when teachers think you’re so

below them, they act like they're power, they're almighty. I just can't stand it. That's the worst quality, to disrespect students. I think if you respect students then they'll respect you."

This last student comment throws into relief what virtually all researchers of student voice have found: that respect is a reciprocal dynamic, and if you give respect, you are more likely to get it. In its reciprocal and relational nature, respect is quite a different premise from rights. It is not decreed from on high, set as a rule or principle that applies regardless of circumstances. Rather, it is a dynamic built between and among people, and it must be supported and sustained in relationship and context: it cannot be established once and for all.

Taken together, then, these two premises that underlie student voice work appeal to both regulation and relationship, to abstract principles and to concrete, lived, human dynamics. Rights are more *a priori*, a-contextual, more about givens, attributes of being an individual; respect is socially negotiated, relational, more fully contextual. Both are about honoring the dignity and the distinctiveness of young people. Even if one is working within a confining, prescribed, controlling, or otherwise un-empowering curriculum or system, if there is an honoring of students' rights as people and if there is respect, then what can happen should be an engagement in life-affirming growth.

It turns out, however, not to be that simple or straightforward. How the principles and dynamics of rights and respect play out in practice varies greatly across contexts and circumstances. A third term that shows up across discussions of student voice work, "listening," highlights how, even when the same principles and commitments are ostensibly in place, very different practices can result.

### **Listening**

Sometimes I wish I could sit down with one of my teachers and just tell them what I exactly think about their class. It might be good, it might be bad, it's just that you don't have the opportunity to do it.

- Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001, p. xii

Arnot et al. (2004) argue that schools have evolved "over the course of two centuries without listening to student voices" (p. 3), and the high school student quoted above offers

evidence that this evolution continues. Not only historically but within each of their individual experiences, Giroux (1992) argues, most students “have been silenced all their lives” (p. 158). The dominant culture of schooling “prevents practitioners from listening to students’ own creative ideas about how systems can change and meet their needs” (Cruddas & Haddock, 2003, p. 6). And yet, as Smyth (forthcoming) suggests in his discussion of his work with youth in Australia, “If we listen carefully to these young informants we can get a clear picture of what it is that is dysfunctional about much of what transpires in schooling, why it is so many young people decide to exit, and how schooling might be different for them.” Young people themselves identify the importance of listening: out of 15,000 students in England who responded to the survey that asked them to describe the kind of school they would like, Rudduck and Demetriou (2003) found that the fourth most popular response was “a listening school” (p. 277).

Because a detailing of all the individual or even kinds of student voice projects built around listening is not possible within the scope of this discussion, I draw on several typologies that scholars have developed in an effort to map the field and differentiate the practices that identify as student voice work that foreground listening (for thorough discussions of the typologies, see Fielding, 2001a and 2001b, 2004b; Hart, 1997; Holdsworth, 2000; Lee & Zimmerman, 2001; Lodge, 2005; Mitra, forthcoming; Thomson & Holdsworth, 2003; Thiessen, 1997). The term “listening” surfaces in various ways, signaling different kinds and extents of student participation, ownership, and agency. For instance, Holdsworth’s (2000) “student participation ladder” moves from “youth/student voice: speaking out” to “being heard” to “being listened to” to “being listened to seriously and with respect” to “incorporating youth/student views into actions taken by others” to “sharing decision-making, implementation of action, and reflection on action with young people” (p. 358). In this case, listening is in the middle of the “ladder,” beyond simply speaking out and being heard but not as high as taking action and shared decision making. Mitra’s (forthcoming) discussion of types of student voice work in school reform uses “listening” to refer to a process through which “adults listen to student perspectives as a form of raw knowledge for either research or reform”; she uses “collaboration” to signal a “focus on research” within which “students and adults work together to conduct research and/or to develop changes”; and she uses “leadership” to signal a “focus on change” within which “youth are in charge of the activity and make most of the decisions. Adults provide

assistance.” In this case, listening is the most basic form of attention to student voice with “collaboration” and “leadership” signaling increasingly greater roles and agency for students.

Lodge (2005) makes explicit some underlying principles that inform both typologies mentioned above, suggesting that approaches to student voice can be analyzed along two dimensions: the role of the student and the purposes for which participation is being sought. Four types she identifies are: (1) quality control; (2) students as a source of information; (3) compliance and control; and (4) dialogue. When the purpose is quality control, students are listened to merely as sources of feedback on externally imposed approaches to school improvement. When students are sources of information, their perspectives are listened to and then improvement is either done to them or the students provide important information for teachers to act upon. The “compliance and control” type “takes some account of ideas about the rights of young people to be involved in decisions about school but the students’ voice is used to serve institutional ends.” In the fourth type, dialogue, students “are viewed as active participants” and their voices included as part of an ongoing discussion. In this last type, listening and speaking are the twin responsibilities of all parties.

Fielding’s (2004b) four-part typology includes (1) students as data source, (2) students as active respondents’, (3) students as co-researchers, and (4) students as researchers. Again, agency and position relative to work to be done guide this analysis. When students are data sources, there is “a real teacher commitment to pay attention to student voice speaking through the practical realities of work done and targets agreed.” With “students as active respondents,” there is “a teacher willingness to move beyond the accumulation of passive data and a desire to hear what students have to say about their own experience in lessons and in school.” With “students as co-researchers” there is “more of a partnership than the two previous modes and, whilst student and teacher roles are not equal, they are moving more strongly in an egalitarian direction.” Within “students as researchers...partnership remains the dominant working motif, but here it is the voice of the student that comes to the fore and in a leadership or initiating, not just a responsive role” (pp. 201-202). In Fielding’s typology, listening means four clearly different things, based on four different positions and roles of students and purposes for listening.

While each of these typologies illuminates possible different meanings of “listening” and assumes or implies rights of students and respect for students as premises, one typology in

particular, what Thomson and Gunther (2005) call a “discursive framing of pupil voice,” makes rights an explicit dimension of analysis:

	1. Standards and improvement discourse	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 activity 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

These different typologies point to various versions of listening: listening as a gesture, listening to change adult-driven practices, listening to be guided by students’ ideas of what needs to change. As I discuss next, individual researchers’, teachers’, and students’ experiences of listening also point to the multiple meanings of the term.

Focusing at the classroom level, McLaughlin et al. (1999) contend that children “want to be listened to and value it enormously and many teachers still want to listen primarily to the child’s voice” (p. 100). Teachers who choose to listen to students within the classroom are concerned with “pupils’ own perspectives on classroom teaching and learning” (Arnot et al., 2004, p. 3; see also Fielding, 2004b; MacBeath et al., 2003; Postlethwaite & Haggerty, 2002; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001). As Lincoln (1995) put it, among the skills of a good teacher are “the ability to ‘hear’ well and deeply, or simply to listen” (p. 95). Ballenger (forthcoming) provides an example of such listening when she looks closely at the “puzzling” of two immigrant fourth-grade students within a classroom built on principles of exploration and critical inquiry; she writes, “This was a curriculum and a classroom and a way of listening that valued diversity in ‘ways with words’ and expected that puzzling children were making sense.”

Bragg (forthcoming) points to a complicated aspect of this kind of listening, however. Discussing the claim of a teacher who questioned a particular student voice effort in her school because “she already listens to children,” Bragg suggests that, “Many primary school teachers’ identity is founded on concepts from child-centred or progressive pedagogies in which they see themselves as deeply engaged in children’s worlds. This is very different, however, from the kind of listening...where in effect, the kinds of questions to be asked, and the range of ‘voices’ children can use, shifts significantly.”

The importance of listening is also asserted in realms that include but reach beyond the classroom—in schools at large, in publications, in planning for the future, and in developing thinking about education. McPhail, Kirk, and Eley (2003) argue for the need to listen to the voices of young people in regard to what motivates them to participate or deters them from participating in sports. At the wider school level, Bragg (forthcoming) argues, with a chapter title, that ‘It’s Not About Systems, It’s About Relationships’: Building a Listening Culture in a Primary School.” In this case, listening to students guided action and change in a primary school in England. Likewise, Flutter and Rudduck (2004) assert that, “The most important argument for listening to the pupil voice lies in its potential for providing schools with directions for constructing a better future” (pp. 131-132). Cook-Sather and Shultz (2001) argue for and enact a different kind of listening to students through inviting them to be the primary authors of chapters included in an edited volume focused on how schools need to change. This kind of listening—in the initial invitations, in the creation of space for composition of their voices, and in publication of those voices—presented student voices to a wide audience. Pollard, Thiessen, and Filer (1997) assert that, “Listening to pupil voices should not be seen as a sentimental or romantic option, but as a serious contribution to educational thinking and development” (p. 5). Finally, discussing the commitment made by nations that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, John (1996) explains that not only have such nations committed themselves to protect and care for children, they have also “committed themselves to *listening* to children” (p. 3, emphasis in original), by which she means that adults can no longer make assumptions about what children should or do think and instead “children’s *own* views and voices have to be heard and taken into account” (p. 4, emphasis in original).

Students around the world verify these assertions and articulate the power of being listened to, whatever that means to them. Oliver, a student at Wheatcroft Primary School in Hertford, England, says: “Pupils feel better by knowing that teachers will listen to them.” Another student at the same school, Charlotte, says: “I think that listening to children is vital so that children are happier and teachers know what they like and what they can do” (Pupils at Wheatcroft Elementary, 2001, p. 51, p. 52). A student in a suburban, secondary school in the northeastern United States said: “The best way to master the art of teaching is to really listen to student feedback and to change based on what students say” (Cook-Sather, forthcoming). And a student in Mitra’s (2001) study in the western United States said, “If you talk and people don’t listen, you don’t want to talk anymore” (p. 92).

The typologies I discuss above as well as individual assertions of the importance of listening have a corollary in some discussions in educational research. As a central component of qualitative research, listening takes on a new meaning and form when researchers listen to students as informants (Cook-Sather, forthcoming). Researchers committed to listening to student voices must “change our understanding of what it means to listen” (Thorkildsen, forthcoming; see also Dahl, 1995). Using established qualitative research methods, such as interviewing, in new ways “allows researchers to consider carefully what ‘listening to’ might mean” (Gallagher & Lortie, forthcoming).

In order to get student views heard and understood, forums for listening have to be appropriated and created anew (Cook-Sather, 2002b; Levin, 1994). Lewis (1996) describes how he and a group of 9- and 10-year-old students designed and facilitated a workshop to teach adults how to listen to young people at the UN Convention held at the University of Exeter in 1992. Discussing work currently underway in the United Kingdom, Fielding (2004b) writes: “[Within the Students as Researchers model] teachers are not just committed to appreciative listening in order to learn from students in joint enquiry but active listening in order to contribute to and support student-led research” (p. 202). These descriptions point to the kind of listening that, as Delpit (1988) argues, “requires not only open eyes and ears but also open hearts and minds” (p. 298). It is the opposite of speaking for others, the effect of which, Alcoff (1995) contends, “is often, though not always...a reinscription...of hierarchies” (p. 250). To break this cycle of reinscription, educators and educational researchers need to learn “to speak by listening” (Freire,

1998, p. 104). Several researchers offer discussions of issues and dilemmas of listening to children in educational contexts (Gersch, 1996; Cruddas & Haddock, 2003; Russell, 1996).

### **Implications?**

This exploration of the way of naming associated with “student voice” is preliminary, not meant to be exhaustive or definitive. Instead, it follows in the spirit Hill (2003) describes: “Rather than seeking to provide a new official set of meanings/words, we seek to open up for debate these familiar signifiers, and thereby their different contexts and signifying realms.” The terms “rights,” “respect,” and “listening” are all central to many publications on student voice work, but they raise questions and concerns as well as signal possible productive shifts in power dynamics and practices that might, in turn, lead to a significant cultural shift. It is one thing to say these words and evoke their (multiple) meanings, but enacting the most radical, transformative versions of them takes more than awareness and commitment; it takes understanding and hard work, consideration and re-consideration, calling into question and, most importantly, changing. It requires letting go of what we think we know and entertaining the possibility of profoundly repositioning students in educational research and reform.

This challenge is part of the greater challenge of democracy; it is an ideal that we will never reach, but we need to keep striving. A democracy should be premised on change, not just reproduction, but there is more and more that is interfering with that commitment within school frames. Because schools are set up on premises of prediction, control, and management, anything that challenges those premises is hard to accomplish within formal educational contexts. Until teachers, administrators, policy makers, and the wider public see that there is value in this particular kind of change prompted by attending to, responding to, and following the lead of students, and indeed embracing the threat these actions carry, efforts that aggregate under the term “student voice” will not get very far. Even though this work of listening to, responding to, and being guided by student voices is not about succeeding—not about “getting there”—but rather about always changing in response to what we hear, it is a challenge to convince people of the value of the paradox that to listen to students, to build relationships, is to better understand, to be more engaged, to be more successful.

The disconnect, then, between what we know and what we do, between the espoused goal of supporting student learning and the reality of ignoring students, will not be entirely addressed by “student voice.” Engaging in student voice work in the realms of educational research and reform will not release us from the problems and constraints under which we currently labor, but it can help us deal with them more maturely, thoughtfully, life affirmingly. The present exploration was undertaken in that spirit—to look across discussions carried on by people who advocate the rights of students, who respect what students experience and say, and who are committed to life-affirming forms of listening. The goal was to strengthen the connections within a community across nations—to show that this work is happening in different places, to tell a different kind of story of what schooling and research can be, to create some solidarity across continents with the commitments and the willingness to continually rethink those commitments through our words and actions.

As part of the life-affirming work signaled by the positive aspects of “student voice” and in guarding against the negative aspects, we must listen to and act on students’ words not once but again and again (Cook-Sather, 2002b; Wilson & Corbett, 2001) in part because “the engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). We must recognize that students, like adults, are always speaking from complex positions—“not single but multiple...always located” (Kamler, 2001, p. 36) and always evolving. At the same time, though, as Fine et al. (forthcoming) and others caution, we must guard against voice being “coopted into a neo liberal frame of the personal individualized story, as if about choice, autonomy, freedom from structures or a self disconnected from history and politics. An intellectual and political commitment to ‘student voice’ must interrogate the deep corduroy threads that connect and resist patterns of domination and privilege in ... schools.” But even short of cooptation, it is not possible just to “do” student voice without thinking and rethinking—and most likely changing—one’s larger political framework.

Fielding (2004a) cautions that “to include hitherto silenced voices in research is not of itself empowering or liberating, not only...because such inclusion may be manipulative, but also because unless we are clear who is listening, whether such attentiveness is customary or spasmodic, an entitlement or a dispensation, then the power of those who speak and those who

hear cannot be understood” (p. 301). Longstanding assumptions and structures must be dismantled to shift the culture and practices of schools (Cook-Sather, 2002b; Fullan, 1991; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck, forthcoming, 2002). Differently positioned people making different arguments, like those premised on multiculturalism, feminism, and constructivism, have core commitments in common—to listening and responding to a diverse set of perspectives and not just tolerating or tokenizing them but always destabilizing the center; to acknowledging that what you don’t know is much bigger than what you know; to the notion that the project of school is an ongoing negotiation rather than transmission; to the idea that education is a process based on rights and relationship; to the most basic premise that education is about change.

Change is a big idea. To genuinely engage not only students’ voices but also their entire beings, we need to be open to change, willing to change. Also, what students say and what we do will change over time. None of these are one-time things; they are ongoing. Currently, many people are using the term “student voice” to assert that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling, that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults, and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education. Until we find a better way to talk about how students are positioned in educational research and reform—about the sound, presence, and power of students in education—“student voice” will need to carry these convictions.

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Notes

<sup>i</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s there was a wave of similar thinking, but it did not then catalyze long-term revision or change. For discussions of these earlier efforts, see Levin, 2000, and Rudduck, forthcoming and 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> In this discussion, “young people” and “students” refer to school students—students at the elementary and secondary, not college, levels.

<sup>iii</sup> For a very thorough and thought-provoking discussion of the history, basis, and trends in research on students’ experiences of school, see Thiessen, forthcoming.