# Student voice at the 'heart of learning'

**Graham Robertson**
*University of East London, UK*

## Abstract

**W**hat, if anything, can listening to student voice tell us about young people's perception of their educational experiences today? Is it important or even relevant to take note of their views? Is it realistic to expect the student with limited experiences and resources to make the changes required by their institutions? This paper describes the experiences and approaches used in one London inner-city Learning Support Unit to engage and support students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Drawing on the work of Foucault's 1983 lectures on 'Discourse and truth', 'student voice', Ginott's congruent conversation techniques and the use of story and metaphor, the paper seeks to illustrate and explore the use of these different techniques and approaches to assist students to make sense of the situations they face.

**Keywords:** Learning Support Unit; metaphor; parrhesia; student voice.

## Introduction

The legacy left by Jean Rudduck in championing the concept of 'student voice' in the 1990s remains as relevant today as it was groundbreaking then. Fielding (2007: 324), describes this legacy as a 'deep understanding [of] and commitment' to the idea that in order for teachers to engage with students in new learning contexts it is first necessary for them to gain a 'genuine' understanding of their students' perceptions. Through this process both teacher and student enter into and develop a 'learning partnership' which helps to facilitate a more productive and potentially successful learning outcome. The value of this 'learning partnership' is enhanced further when set against the whole framework of the institution. Traditionally emphasis lay solely upon the student's need to conform to the expectations placed upon them by the institution, and little thought was given to the responsibilities of the institution towards the student. To be an effective change agent for learning, the institution needs to put the learner at the heart of the process and listen to them. Stenhouse (1983) reminds us that 'the first claim of the school is that of its pupils for whose welfare the school exists' (Fielding 2007: 324).

Noyes (2005: 533) quotes Flutter & Rudduck (2004) in maintaining that 'student voice' lies at the heart of a school in that it 'becomes a community of participants engaged in the common endeavour of learning'. In doing so they reflect the '…democratic structures in society at large'.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Articles 12 and 13, clearly states the expectation that young people have the right to be heard and listened to. A number of Government 'top-down' approaches exist: Every Child Matters; the Department of Education and Skills, Working together – giving children a say (2004); the inspection body Ofsted's attempts to involve 'student voice' in the inspection process, etc. However, Flutter (2007: 345) urges teachers not to 'overlook the simpler and profound rationale of pupil voice which is that it affords teachers an opportunity to refocus their attention on what really matters – learners and how they learn best'. Cook-Sather (2006: 359) puts forward the view that young people have particular insights into learning, teaching and schooling. She goes further in declaring that these insights merit both serious attention and responses from the adults around them, with the aim of actively informing and shaping their education.

The concept of 'student voice' and participatory learning is not a new one. Rudduck & Fielding (2006: 221), draw attention to the views of Harold

Dent, a headteacher: writing about his students in 1939, he wanted to 'free them from sitting like little models', and consult them to discover, 'what sort of curriculum would be best for their development'. Flutter (2007: 344) highlights her view that listening to 'student voice' and, 'responding to what pupils say about their experiences as learners can be a powerful tool in helping teachers to investigate and improve their own practice'."

Fielding (2004: 309), however, also draws attention to the reality that although some examples can be found of engaging with 'student voice', he felt that 'there are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where teachers and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together'.

The 'power' and 'authority 'aspects of 'student voice' do raise concern for some adults, who feel there needs to be more of a 'distance' between themselves and their students. Cook-Sather (2006: 366) explores the influence of 'power shift' between adults and students: 'the 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'. This 'power shift' can be perceived as threatening to both institution and individual teachers. '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' (Cook-Sather 2006: 363).

Fullan (1991: 170) reminds us that there are wider implications at stake in not listening to 'student voice'. He quotes Bowles & Gintis (1976) and reflects upon the question, 'Why in a democratic society, should an individual's first real contact with a formal institution be so profoundly anti-democratic?' Fullan, writing about institutional change, reminds us that, 'change, above all is a people-related phenomenon for each and every individual'. At the heart of the institution, as Stenhouse (1983) reminds us, is the student. Fullan poses the question, 'What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in schools?'

## Parrhesia

The importance of 'student voice' and the issues of 'authority and power' are played out in the concept of parrhesia. In his 1983 lectures on 'Discourse and truth' Foucault considered issues around the idea of parrhesia in terms of it being an activity of 'truth telling', which is closely akin to that of 'student voice'. Although the concept of parrhesia is one that can be widely interpreted and has classical roots which Foucault locates in the works of Euripides (484–407 BC), it does encompass ideas of 'free speech' and 'speaking from the heart' which reflect aspects of 'student voice'. There are many 'forms' of parrhesia, some of which can be found in a small community context, or within the framework of 'public life', or are present within individual personal relationships (Foucault 1999: 44).

Foucault describes parrhesia in terms of five main characteristics: 'frankness', being prepared to speak one's mind; 'truth', both knowing it and communicating it; an element of 'risk' or 'danger' associated with the action; 'criticism' which must be implicit; and finally, the process being one of 'moral duty' on the part of the speaker (Peters 2003: 212). Central to parrhesia is the relationship between speaker and audience, in particular the power balance within that relationship.

In the classical sense, parrhesia describes, for example, a philosopher's need to 'speak truthfully' to a ruler. In speaking out in this manner the speaker may make themselves very vulnerable and stand in an uncertain or risky position with their intended audience. The content of what is said may be carefully chosen, a deliberate decision on the part of the speaker, or be an unintended consequence of what they say. The speaker is usually aware that they are communicating some 'truth'. The 'truth' of a situation can of course be open to wide interpretation; however, the 'touchstone' for this is the sincerity of what is said, and that is located in the 'risk' the speaker takes in saying what they feel needs to be said.

This boldness risks incurring the possible wrath or displeasure of the listener, which can lead to upset, punishment or censure, or benefits and rewards for both participants.

Within the parrhesiastic relationship, there lies an element of 'personal attitude or quality' which makes the exchange of views unique within both the speaker and the person who holds power.

The authority figure plays a key role in this form of dialogue and can strengthen or weaken themselves by accepting or rejecting the message communicated by the 'truth teller'. Foucault points to the Greek historians' assumption that a good ruler is one that is prepared to hear the views of 'honest advisors' and even perhaps to consider that such views may reflect a 'silent majority'. Foucault uses Jocasta's dialogue in the Greek play The Phoenician Women to illustrate that refusal to allow someone who is less powerful than yourself to express their view is tantamount to condemning them to being a 'voiceless' slave. Withholding or preventing someone from feeling free to express their view and thereby hearing no criticism is placing the person with power in a position of 'dishonour' or weakness and the speaker in a position of frustration or impotence.

In order to encourage parrhesia and to counter this possible weakness on the part of the leader, Foucault describes the 'parrhesiastic contract' modelled by Pentheus in The Bacchae. Here we find a 'moral obligation' on the wielder of power to offer this 'contract' in order to encourage the speaker to express themselves honestly: 'if you tell me the truth, no matter what this truth turns out to be, you won't be punished; and those who are responsible for any injustices will be punished, but not those who speak the truth about such injustices' (Foucault 1983: 11). The 'contract' is of course only a 'moral obligation' and relies heavily upon the ability of the holder of power to exhibit a 'nobleness of soul' tempered by emotional restraint.

But what if the authority figure must endure listening to 'emotive ramblings' rather than restrained and measured 'truths'? The emotional context and content of what is said can be an issue, especially if the listener is expecting a measured and thought-through response. In an emotionally charged situation what is said can sometimes be dismissed simply as 'so much hot air' expressed in anger. However, that does not necessarily negate the value to the authority figure of what is said. This can even be the case when the speaker

at a later date attempts to retract or apologise once they recognise the effect their words have upon their audience. Foucault (1983: 26) refers to such a speaker as being an 'Athuroglossos', or having, 'a mouth like a running spring', from which pours forth not so much 'honest speaking' but more an unimpeded flow of thoughtless utterings. It is beholden on the 'Athuroglossos' to use an opportunity for speaking in a manner more imbued with a conscious desire to transmit some 'truth' or 'honest communication'. Simply speaking without thought through 'arrogance', 'frankness', 'ignorance' or 'bluster' is still unwise on the part of the speaker as their outspoken and 'babbling' comments may not escape arousing the displeasure of the hearer given any status divide. However, their 'emotive' ramblings may still contain elements of truth.

Within the context of a school situation, teachers can experience any number of encounters that could be described as being 'Athuroglossos' in nature and these can be highly emotionally charged. They can be interpreted as direct challenges to the teacher's authority and received negatively, sometimes resulting in an equally emotive response from the adult. These encounters can be 'emotionally charged' with past history and the memory of more recent encounters with the 'Athuroglossos' or even his parents or kin. Even when the teacher may have sympathies with the young person, past history, personal experience and the views of the institution itself can combine to work against the student. Sometimes these influences are dictated by power figures within the school that regard the views expressed by the student as a threat to the reputation or good order of the institution. The outcome of views expressed in parrhesia can result in adults joining together in conscious or unintended 'conspiracy' to act negatively against a student who has expressed themselves 'truthfully', if at times, clumsily or rudely.

### Applying the 'parrhesiastic contract'

In the classical description of parrhesia the relationship involves a person of less power who is moved to reveal a 'truth' to a person of power or authority. In the modern sense the power relationship divide remains but the obligation upon the person of power is to listen to the views of the

young person without retaliation. In the classical description of parrhesia the person with power and authority should be guided by the 'parrhesiastic contract' and under a moral obligation to stay their power against the weaker party. Experience in schools has led me to the view that a student needs to think very carefully before expressing their views to authority figures who perhaps may not be attuned to the classical 'moral' responsibilities placed upon them by the 'parrhesiastic contract'.

Noyes (2005: 538) quotes Somekh (2001) in stating that schools do not always provide a supportive environment for learning and, 'may provide the structures which cause many children to develop a "failing" identity by not taking notice of "student voice"'. However, the opposite is also apparent, as can be seen from this quote from a secondary school teacher making clear that where opportunities for listening to 'student voice' are taken, benefits in learning can also be present:

'I know from working with students that the more you talk with them and involve them, the more it changes the learning relationship… When you work with students in that way, you can see they're learning about all sorts of things – about themselves, about the subject and how they learn, about other students.' (Flutter 2007: 351)

The benefits of listening to 'student voice' using both the ideals of the 'parrhesiastic contract' and 'student voice' can bring benefits in engaging students in a learning dialogue.

### The Learning Support Unit

In the context of a busy inner-city London secondary school's Learning Support Unit (LSU) such an approach has been found useful in engaging students who find learning and attendance at school difficult. The aim of the LSU was to engage students whose behaviour was regarded as 'challenging' and 'disruptive' to subject staff and students. Within the LSU the staff always seek to stay true to the 'moral obligation' of the 'parrhesiastic contract' by receiving what the student says in a calm emotional manner in order to learn with them and from them. Many of the students who came to the Unit were often burdened, angry, disaffected and far from happy to be in school. For some, the Unit was their last chance before being excluded. The

general approach used to engage students was closely based on the work of Ginott (1971: 63) who advocated 'the healing dialogue' in a listening and supportive 'scaffolding' process which places the young person in control of their responses. Similarly, Faber and Mazlish (2006: 31), in the spirit of the 'parrhesiastic contract', promote the acceptance of thoughts and feelings in a non-judgemental manner as part of the learning conversation which helps facilitate a solution-focused outcome.

To supplement the usual subject-based curriculum work, small 'interest projects' were used with students who exhibited emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. Students often responded positively to the attention they received in the Unit and usually found something special from handling a range of horticultural plants in particular. A shift in focus can occur from 'person' or 'problem' to caring for a living thing made up of stems, roots, leaves and flowers. The plant itself becomes the focus of attention and in doing so can become a receptacle for thoughts, feelings and emotions. The plant facilitates talk about 'non-school issues' such as watering, fertilising, pinching and potting and these activities can be used to build metaphors that help to identify feelings and emotions.

### Modelling behaviour

For example, there was a young lad whose father had died tragically through misuse of drugs and alcohol, leaving his addict mother and him to cope in difficult circumstances. He was a very 'difficult' student and caused mayhem in the school by disrupting lessons, threatening students and staff alike. He became a 'regular' visitor as he was often brought to us or had to be collected after incidents of 'out of control' behaviour. Gradually, he grew to know and trust us after we repeatedly extended the hand of 'unconditional positive regard' no matter what he said or did. Faber & Mazlish (2006: 40), talk of assuming a 'respectful attitude and respectful language that makes it possible for our teenagers to hear us and cooperate'."

Our patience was tested on many occasions. At times his anger knew no bounds and expressed his hopelessness and helplessness in the face of a diminished future. Time and again he saw his future in the broken lives of his own parents – drugs, prison, and drunkenness.

Patiently we listened and modelled the behaviour and responses we wanted him to adopt and helped to build his vocabulary so he could find expression more safely through language. We worked hard at building rapport and engaging him, knowing full well that his days were numbered in the school unless he turned things around. He impatiently tested our emotional reserves to the extreme by being as obnoxious as he could. Sometimes we thought we had turned a corner and things were getting better only to be brought down to earth again by some unexpected foul-mouthed rant or incident of threatening behaviour.

Slowly over time he learned with us how to calm and control himself. The usual repertoire of art, craft, puzzles, maths, word and computer games was beginning to wear thin though. Regular curriculum subject work was a definite turn-off, however we presented it. He would quickly see through our efforts to present Macbeth, Forces or Fractions in 'fun' or concealed formats, much to the exasperation of his subject teachers.

A different type of distraction was called for and found in the living green things on our windowsills – in particular, a Kalanchoe diagremontiana, or Mexican hat plant. This unusual and rather prolific indoor plant gave ample scope for the use of metaphor and interest, which helped the young man to turn a corner in his thinking. Griffin & Tyrrell (2011: 219), extol the virtues of using metaphor as an aid to thinking and learning. Using metaphor is effective because our brains can be receptive to pattern-matching ideas and concepts to our existing thinking and past experiences and seeing them in a new light. 'Often the teachers who most influence pupils' education are those who use anecdotes and stories to make their lessons come alive' (Griffin & Tyrell 2004: 224).

## A useful metaphor

The metaphor used with our young man was inspired by the plant he was standing near and tending. As we harvested and planted the tiny seedlings copiously produced by the Kalanchoe diagremontiana, we talked about their readiness to drop off the parent plant and flourish wherever they fell. This seemed to genuinely fascinate him. As we talked about what we saw he enjoyed shaking the plant and seeing the small plantlets shed from the mother plant. As I watched, I shared with him a mental image of him coming from his parents, being part of them and looking similar to them, just as the plantlets were similar to the mother plant. Each plantlet, just like him, was a living entity in its own right. Just like those small plantlets, he too could begin to grow upright and strong, become independent of his parents, just like the seedlings we were handling and planting.

He found this metaphor more helpful than could ever have been imagined. From then on he always checked the action on the windowsill when he visited, and took interest in and enjoyment from the plantlet's progress. We even managed a few sessions on the African origins of the plant and a bit of biology. We saw him a few times more before he left the area to live with foster carers. Before he left he made it quite clear he would not miss us at all and that we had 'mugged him off to the max' and was glad to be leaving. Not an unusual phenomenon as it is a familiar repeated pattern of behaviour with other students who find it easier to resort to being obnoxious as a way of coping and handling the emotional fallout they feel when moving on in their lives and leaving the old, familiar and comfortable behind them.

## Conclusion

The key, of course, was listening to the student's voice, adhering to the parrhesiastic contract, thus enabling the ability to develop metaphor from the use of a plant. Plants are pretty uncomplaining. They need care and nurture from anyone who can do the task. It matters not who you are or what you have done, or what your behaviour and language are like. Plants are non-judgemental, non-discriminatory and non-threatening. They respond to the care and attention given to them, not to the strengths or weaknesses of the giver. Using plants in the Unit was one 'tool' used to build rapport through dialogue and discussion with difficult students who often experienced traumatic or disrupted lives. Using the parrhesiastic contract and student voice helps teachers and practitioners to gain insights into many aspects of institutional problems that contribute to students finding it difficult to cope.

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**Contact:** g.robertson@uel.ac.uk