

## Chapter 2

# Theorising the Participation of Children and Young People in Research

In this discussion, in which we identify the conditions under which the participation of children and young people in research and inquiry can be theoretically understood, we are mindful that while the emphasis is upon students in schools we also argue that they can also apply to students in higher education, albeit somewhat differently. Certainly such students may well be mature and not come under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (aged 0–18 years) but their relative status within the structure of universities and colleges remains similar. This will become evident later, in the section of this book that draws upon examples from the field. We also will be considering the participative conditions for children and young people in research and inquiry in relation to their wider engagement in the community.

### Creating Authentic Dialogic Conditions

Before more fully exploring the case for the creation of authentic, dialogic conditions for engaging with children and young people about events and policies that govern their lives through research and inquiry we turn to one of social psychology's notorious experiments that can be perceived as a touchstone for the ways in which various research enterprises have exploited and deceived young people in the past. We do this both to demonstrate the distance that has been travelled, and the need for continuing vigilance regarding what may seem more benign processes but ones that continue to require our attention if we are to move beyond legitimisation and guardianship.

#### *Inside the Robbers Cave*

Over fifty years ago a well-regarded social psychologist, Muzafer Sherif, brought two groups of eleven and twelve year old boys to a summer camp in a small national

park in Oklahoma. The experiment was designed such that the boys' behaviour could be studied, analysed and discussed in the context of cold war discourses regarding war, difference, prejudice and discrimination. The boys had been carefully selected from middle class families to take part in, for what seemed to them, an exciting three weeks of outdoor activity (Sherif et al. 1988). Researchers, doubling as counsellors divided the boys into two social groups and constructed circumstances where they would come into conflict with one another. Initially, each group did not know of the other group's existence. The object of the study was to observe how the boys dealt with friction that had resulted, for example, from the unfair distribution of prizes during various competitions between the two groups. Then, later, the objective shifted to how the groups reduced the conflict that had been constructed when faced with the achievement of tasks that required intergroup cooperation (Siddanius and Pratto 1999).

In a recent Australian Broadcasting Corporation program, *Hindsight*, Gina Perry, a well regarded psychologist and investigator of the Milgram experiments<sup>1</sup> (Perry 2012) created an episode that featured interviews with, among others, some of the boys who had participated in the experiment—boys who were now mature men (ABC radio 2013). A number expressed dismay at the ways in which they had been misled and portrayed. As one put it:

I don't remember it as a bad experience, viscerally. It's in retrospect reading these transcripts, I ask myself, 'who are these bastards?' ... These men taking notes and pictures of kids struggling over a tug of war? It's not a bad thing, but it was the wrong thing to do morally (3 min prior to the conclusion of the broadcast)

Although memories were now fading the participants maintained that their own recollections of their experiences could have been related in a very different voice. The study collected only the observations of the investigators, whose beliefs and desires for a particular outcome were seen to shape their observations. Staff appeared to "play to the script" and to "push things along in line with the hypothesis".

In an interview, re-played in the broadcast, Sharif was asked whether he saw any ethical problem with an experiment that was designed to deceive those who took part, his answer was "No, not at all." It has since been pointed out that codes of practice for organisations such as the American Psychological Association (APA) are not grounded in moral philosophy (Kimmel 2007). However, our argument throughout this book is that engaging in participative research with children and young people **is** a moral enterprise that has at its heart a democratic impulse.

We turn, then, to consider more fully the case for authentic dialogic conditions for working with children and young people in inquiry settings under the broad category of 'student voice'.

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<sup>1</sup> The Milgram experiments were a series of social psychology experiments designed to measure the ways in which participants were willing to obey a person with authority who required them to perform a series of electric shocks in conflict with their conscience. Perry believed that just as these experiments were coercive and unethical, so too were the Sherif experiments with young people.

## **Authentic Dialogic Conditions for Working with Children and Young People**

Engaging in dialogue, in conversation, in interaction with one another is a fundamental human activity and one that is ordinarily taken for granted. But the conditions for taking part in such activity will significantly moderate who can say what, when and how. We may well argue that the conditions that ordinarily prevail in educational practices may not always allow for “conversation”, in that the moderators relate closely to issues of power and authority. Thus in theorising the participation of children and young people in inquiry that requires reciprocity and respect and which embodies concepts of active citizenship as opposed to a purpose of human capital development, it is essential to examine the prevailing conditions, and, in particular the ways in which the exercise of power plays out in education settings. Kazepides (2012, p. 914) talks of education as dialogue that is undoubtedly normative, ideally being in every sense caring, engaging and inseparable from the demands of reason. He sees reasoning as embodying the principles of freedom, truth telling and respect for others. This position stands in contrast to Smyth & McNerney’s view regarding those for whom mainstream schooling has failed when they write such young people “are the most salient witnesses of what occurs in schools and classrooms, yet at the same time they are the most marginalized and excluded” (Smyth and McNerney 2012, p. 3) a matter to which we return in Chap. 7.

### ***The Dialogic Process***

Initially the issues that we wish to discuss here arise from understandings of Habermasian concepts of the dialogic process, or as Linklater (2005) has characterised them, “dialogic politics”. Linklater refers us to the matter as to whether engaging in dialogue is a civilising process based upon the rights of the speaker to be heard under circumstances that are fair to all. This resonates to the conditions that Habermas (1974, 1984) first articulated when he wrote of the “ideal speech situation” (ISS) where he identified four conditions for authentic dialogue: that no one who is capable of making a relevant contribution has been excluded; that all participants have an equal voice; that they are free to speak to their opinions without deceiving others or themselves; and, that there is no coercion built into the processes or procedures of the discourse. This can be said to contribute to a well conducted ‘language game’ (McCarthy 1976, p. xiii–xiv).

The employment of the word ‘ideal’ should enable us to understand that Habermas did not see such interaction as a normal feature of human communication. Indeed it is counterfactual and what we must be alert to is the distortion to the communicative possibilities that arise as we struggle for understanding one another. The ISS is an aspiration and can become the basis by which we can recognise asymmetry or mismatches. The most systematically distorting feature for Habermas (1984, p. 332) is the extent of the participants’ desire to succeed in socially competitive

situations versus the desire to reach understanding. “Such communication pathologies can be conceived of as the result of a confusion between actions oriented to reaching understanding and actions oriented to success”.

Linklater sees that this tussle establishes “a need for permanent openness to dialogue” as social structures grow, wither or change. While he does not specifically consider schools in his exegesis, it is within these contexts that much of our discussion is grounded as we ask ourselves ‘how within such structures it is possible to maintain an openness to dialogue without it becoming a power struggle?’

To reiterate, the position taken by Habermas, his discussion of the ISS both in his early and later work, rests on the claim that individuals have the right to be consulted about decisions that affect them and to be protected from both intended and unintended forms of harm. This position challenges the ways in which barriers are constructed that prevent full participation in the discourses and decisions that arise from them by less privileged and less powerful groups, in the case of our discussion, children and young people. Thus, Linklater rightly sees the need for a core commitment to discourse ethics, that all human beings have a right to participate in the communities to which they belong and that their freedoms grow from non-coercive communication. Clearly, then, the process is one that is political and being political must take account of the ways in which power is exercised in the relationships between children, young people, and the adults with whom they engage, in particular in school settings.

Devine (2002, p. 303) insists that a theory of power is central to any discussion of children’s rights in having a voice and being heard. Her discussion is grounded in a discourse of citizenship and the centrality of participation that challenge traditional patterns of association: children with adults, adults with children; students with teachers, teachers with students.

## **Theorising Issues of Power and Active Citizenship**

Power and citizenship as understood by Devine and characterised in terms of identity and belonging is built upon a concept of the development of social capital, that is the social glue that holds individuals, functioning in social institutions such as schools and universities together. Of course the concept has a far wider reach, but for our purposes building social capital in schools, in particular, means creating bonds and bridges that will contribute to and sustain group norms as a form of active citizenship. In the main, these norms are those that are determined by the school’s own structure. Although we also admit the caveat that in general school structures are directed to mainstream students, but we argue should also be concerned with those of marginalised and minority groups. As McMurray and Niens (2012, p. 214) have observed participatory processes that aim to promote social capital as citizenship need to be well planned and structured to enable young people to work effectively together. But they also note the insidious effect of the lack of transparency when social capital is treated unproblematically as if the term and its meaning is agreed by all who participate and all have an equal share.

It is for this reason that examining the nature of power and its manifestation in schools, and indeed in universities, is critical to theorising matters of participation.

### ***Power Cannot be Gifted as a Product, but Understood as a Process***

Good hearted though the intentions may be in terms of enabling children and young people to have a voice in their schooling, and in a broader sense, their education, there are structural features that ensure that the distribution of power is unequal. Students may be afforded a voice, but they cannot be ‘empowered’ as though power is a gift that can be bestowed. As we have already observed, students have a right to be heard; however, there is a persistent perception that those who establish forums for students to engage in meaningful dialogue see themselves doing so as an act of generosity. This issue is of such significance that it will be further discussed in Chap. 4 where we consider manifestations of power in relation to current formulations of evidence based practice—a nostrum of great appeal to those who govern.

While we take issue with Taylor and Robinson (2009, p. 169) in their assertion that Habermasian models of dialogue “posit communication processes as transparent and unproblematic” nonetheless, their stance that takes the matter of power as central to more adequately theorising issues around student voice, leads us to a more critical understanding. They take a clear position when they assert “student voice is a normative project and has its basis in ethical and moral practice which aims to give students the right of democratic participation in school processes” (p. 161). They go on to argue that the relation of voice to power has not received sufficient theoretical attention.

If we see power as a tangible *product* it may then be constructed as some sort of commodity to be transacted and even shared piece by piece. Those who claim that they are ‘empowering’ students may unwittingly be attempting to diffuse dissent by co-opting their voice. In effect, they may be wishing to enable the less powerful to be treated with respect and consideration and to embolden them to have a capacity to make significant decisions regarding their engagement and wellbeing and ultimately to contribute to the improvement of educational practice, but their intention is to enhance the reputation of the school, or indeed the university or college, rather than the agency of the students. Taylor and Robinson point out that much of the enactment of “student voice” policies has been directed to school improvement around the “present performance-dominated climate” (p. 163) and that students’ contributions have been coopted to produce surface compliance. This view could be seen as merely palliative, ensuring an adjustment to norms and conditions inherent in the organisation of educational practices.

However, if we conceive power as an often intangible *process* then access to power becomes a critical and thorny issue. This requires an examination of the underlying structures that determine the distribution and underlying assumptions of the power matrices; that is there is a need to render them visible. When students enter into learning institutions, be they schools, universities or colleges, they are confronted by management practices that have grown over many generations and which may seem to them to be immutable.

Fox (2005) in his examination of the difference between rights and power imbalances argues that robust theories of power need to take account of both power as product and power as process. The Rights of the Child as discussed in our opening chapter may be recognised institutionally but the differentials that exist in such major social settings as cited above may mean that children and young people are not able to claim them. Lundy (2007, p. 933) requires four elements to be satisfied as necessary for the implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to.
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

These elements are necessarily influenced by the micro-processes of any given school or place where children and young people are to be engaged in participatory inquiry and research. Furthermore, even with goodwill in many school settings, it is the adults who will decide: when students will meet; where they will meet; how long their meeting may last; and, to what purpose their meeting is conducted (l'Anson 2011). Time and space questions are often treated as unproblematic because they lie at the very heart of the ways in which institutions such as schools are managed. Of all the matters that children and young people can control the timetable is inviolable, particularly in most secondary schools and large universities with their organisation of blocks of learning time and room allocations.

It could be said that the tyranny of the timetable is part and parcel of a custodial regime within school systems where students are required to attend. The parallels between schools and prisons are not as unlikely as they first appear; boredom, fear and powerlessness are but a part of a mix where there are groups that are unequal in terms of power, status and resources. Even the primary school with its greater flexibility is not free from such constraints. Devine (2002, p. 310–311) reported children's comments on the lack of consultation regarding the management of their time

I'd like to be able to choose more... 'cos every day we do the same thing and it gets boring... and if you want to do say PE she wants to do maths or something... she sticks to the same routine all the time. (Boy in fifth class, Hillview)

Sometimes it feels a bit like being a robot... like as if the teacher is in the middle of the room with a great big remote control and you have to be able to do everything she says or you will get into trouble. (Girl in second class, Churchfield)

Just as the provision of time and space is a manifestation of the exercise of power, so too is the matter of 'voice'. In his challenging piece regarding how we position young people as 'learner', 'student' and 'speaker' Biesta (2010) draws our attention, most poignantly, to the last of these. Writing in the context of emancipatory education and invoking the work of Jacques Ranciere, Biesta argues that positioning the student as 'speaker' provides us with a different starting point; one that places power sharing at the commencement of education and not as its end point. It is not merely a matter of those who have the power recognising their students and

allowing them to speak, but rather that they should avoid effacing emancipation by valorising instruction—that is telling students what they may speak of.

The question here is not about who has the ability or capacity to speak—which would at the same time suggest that there are some who are disabled or incapacitated in the domain of speech. The question of who can speak is, in a sense, about who is allowed to speak. But the ‘in a sense’ is important here, as we shouldn’t read ‘being allowed’ in terms of the master who claims the power to decide whether his learners are allowed to open their mouth or not. (Biesta 2010, p. 545)

This is not only a matter for schools. For example, in our universities, the typical organisation of the curriculum into lectures and tutorials positions the students, with little negotiating power, failing to allow them to become ‘speakers’. Hil (2012) refers to the practices of what he calls “production-line teaching” (pp. 101–130) arguing that the university experience has been “de-intellectualised”. Teaching-related activities have been standardised, with set templates for course outlines with rigid learning objectives giving students (and indeed lecturers) little agency. Students may be given some opportunities to provide feedback, but only in the terms determined by tick-a-box course evaluations in the form of student experience surveys. Students may be seen, sitting in their serried ranks in lecture theatres, but they are not recognised as being other than respondents to questions determined by others. We take this matter up more fully in Chap. 8.

For Fitzgerald, Graham, Smith and Taylor (2010, p. 295) recognition lies at the heart of participation. The struggle is a one *over* recognition, not only in terms of affirming the young people, but also in recognising how they might contribute:

Nevertheless, the young people identified limited opportunities for participation and were strongly of the view their ‘participation’ is experienced as superficial and constrained: About the only thing the SRC [Student Representative Council] did was raise money for Daffodil Day<sup>2</sup>. SRCs are ... a popularity contest ... it’s not necessarily who’ll do the best job...

The preposition ‘over’ is a critical one here. Fitzgerald et al see that more often the discussion is limited to a struggle *for* recognition that eschews a dialogic approach. Seemingly, more often than not, the recognition is accorded by an agent with the power, the school teacher, the university academic, in contrast to when intersubjective norms of recognition are established with each recognising and affirming the other.

As we have noted, listening to and giving due weight to the perspectives and insights of children and young people has been touted as a requirement of the United Nations Rights of the Child. But too often their actual participation in various forms of decision making, research and inquiry is nominal and tokenistic. There is a desire to consult, but only on the terms of the powerful adults who may well mediate who takes part in any systematic process of consulting, research and inquiry. This leads us to consider who may be included and conversely, who is excluded.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Daffodil Day’ is the Australian Cancer Council’s largest national fundraising event in which most of the nation’s schools participate.



### ***The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion as a Manifestation of Power***

How tempting it is to select those children and young people who will dance to a tune that has already been chosen—that is those students who will be the good ambassadors for the school or institution within a burgeoning culture of neo-liberal economic orthodoxy that markets places for learning as it might the high street shops. While Rudduck and Flutter (2004, p. 137) argued how important it is that the views of a diverse range of students should be sought and that “participation is not just afforded to the articulate and literate” much depends upon what is at stake. In England and Wales, what has been at stake in the past has been very high indeed as consulting students was a central part of Ofsted inspections. For a number of years the managerial hand of Ofsted has played a significant part in insisting that children and young people be consulted; although with little reference to their capacities to undertake research and inquiry. We cite the practice here, as a case. This is in spite of its demise in the new framework for school inspections that removes all pressure on schools to involve their students in self evaluation on the grounds that good schools do this anyway.

### ***The Case of the influence of Ofsted in England and Wales***

Until very recently in England and Wales the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) required schools to demonstrate effective consultation with students. In spite of the injunction that the schools should work with students from varying backgrounds and abilities, the reports from the office suggest that in only exceptional instances was this the case.

According to ‘The Evaluation Schedule for Schools’ January 2010 (Teaching Times 2010), Inspectors should evaluate:

- the extent to which pupils, including those from different groups, take on responsibilities and play a part in the school and wider community
- the extent to which pupils, including those from different groups, engage in decision-making or consultation about issues which affect the quality of their learning and well-being
- the impact of the pupils’ contribution to the school and wider community.

The Guidance Inspectors were asked to take account of the extent to which the school engaged with, among other things:

- the proportion of pupils from different groups who take on positions of responsibility and leadership in school and in the wider community, such as leadership and volunteering activities promoted through the school
- the proportion of pupils from different groups who participate in activities which contribute to the quality of life in, and sustainable development of, the school and wider community



- the quality of the work of the school council or other arrangements which enable pupils to contribute to, and influence, decisions made about life in school and the wider community
- how well pupils participate in activities, such as surveys and discussion, which encourage them to express their views and ideas about the school and wider communities
- the extent to which pupils are involved in working with teachers and other staff in planning and making decisions about their learning and well-being

*Antidote News* (2010) reported, in the face of Ofsted inspections, that schools should be an environment where students have an authentic voice and engage in real dialogue with adults. The organisation's program cites the research of Fielding and Kirby (2009) on student led reviews where they emphasise the importance of developing, among other things:

- the wider school culture and day to day relationships between young people, pupils and staff, staff and staff, staff and parents
- that are respectful, caring of and attentive to each other. Positive relationships across the school community make it more possible for students and parents to feel able to communicate what they think within reviews.
- the organisational structures of the school to support the kinds of conversations that develop the skills, and encourage the dispositions and attitudes required to enable young people to lead the review with confidence and enthusiasm.
- the formal opportunities for pupil involvement in the life of the school that extends beyond committees and representational bodies which inevitably involve a small handful of motivated students to include multiple occasions and opportunities for a wide range of pupils. It is unlikely that students could meaningfully contribute to their reviews if they were not also supported to have a voice within other school contexts.
- the pupils' experience of the curriculum—ie the daily opportunities for learning inside and outside the classroom—includes many and varied ongoing occasions in which they can choose what, where, when, how and with whom they learn. Students are specifically supported to become skilled in reflecting on their learning (eg using assessment for learning) and this is seen as important for them to be able to participate in reviews.
- the focus is on establishing learning conversations with students, rather than perceiving their ideas and views as challenging, in order to develop their capacity for learning. In the words of one teacher "students' new ideas are not a form of criticism." Thus, Students become intrinsically, rather than extrinsically, motivated in their learning.
- Involving students meaningfully within their review means encouraging a genuine belief in its value and an understanding of how to engage young people respectfully. But how do schools support staff to listen to students, without letting their presuppositions about the child get in the way, and without being overbearing or condescending? This takes time and leadership.

Thus, under this regime, school-wide enabling conditions were established, leadership and support staff were committed, students were appropriately supported and

there was to be an ethos of shared responsibility. This can only lead us to wonder why such a powerful tool has been abandoned.

Following the scrapping of the requirement to engage students in providing testimony regarding the school's policies and practices as valued input into the inspectorial process, a number of concerns have been expressed. As the National Union of Teachers put it:

Most importantly, inspection will still be punitive and high-stakes for schools, teachers and head teachers, rather than developmental and supportive. While teachers understand the need for accountability, school evaluation is at its most effective when school communities understand its purpose and relevance. Sadly, the new inspection arrangements are likely to increase the perception that schools need to put on a performance for the inspectors.

### ***Who is Participative and why?***

In spite of the admonition to solicit the views and experiences of a diverse range of children and young people it is the case that those most likely to unsettle practice and induce a sense of discomfort are also those who are least likely to be consulted and engaged in inquiry and research (McIntyre et al. 2005).

Members of established bodies such as Student Representative Councils (SRCs) are more often called upon than those who hold divergent and challenging views. Devine (2002) argued, for example, that the power imbalance in the staff–student relationships was particularly evident within a primary school when the class teacher's choice of student researchers was based on accepting only those she considered possessed the specific, desirable characteristics she wanted the researchers to possess. The process of choosing such individuals and rejecting others resonates with work by McIntyre et al. (2005, p. 155) who questions whether participation in student voice work results in a “dividing practice”, where confident, articulate students are divided from those who “don't fit the dominant discourse and academic aspirations of their school”. Similarly, Fielding (2001) in an early demonstration of his work engaging young people as radical agents of change pointed out that “the value of student perceptions in contemporary high stakes contexts consists largely in their capacity to alert schools to shortcomings of their current performance and possible ways of addressing the deficiencies” (p. 123). That is, in most instances, their engagement is satisfying an entirely instrumental, performative interest.

A decade later Fielding (2011) advances the notion of participation, taking it from ‘student voice’ to a ‘lived democracy’ that produces intergenerational learning between all who are participating in the educational enterprise. This view is echoed by Thornberg (2010) who acknowledges that in order to create deliberate democratic meetings with authentic student participation in school settings, the traditional student control discourse has to be replaced with a deliberative democratic discourse—one that contributes to active citizenship as discussed above. Thus, if students are to have a genuine voice in school regarding the right to participate in decisions affecting them, staff need to learn to put their own views to one side and engage in a more democratic dialogue with students, without attempting to control

Engaging with Student Voice in Research, Education  
and Community

Beyond Legitimation and Guardianship

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