

CHILDREN'S VOICES: HOW DO WE ADDRESS THEIR RIGHT TO BE HEARD?

RALPH CATTS, JULIE ALLAN AND GERI SMYTH

ABSTRACT

In applied education research, a primary goal is to impact upon policy and practice in educational settings. For this reason the Schools and Social Capital (SSC) Network of the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) has adopted a collaborative approach in which teachers and pupils are encouraged to engage with and inform the research process.

Projects undertaken in the SSC Network consider outcomes of schooling in the context of social capital. In planning the research activities we have noted that in many previous studies there is an absence of children's voices. The assumption appears to be that young people are passive beneficiaries of various interventions. There are however some notable exceptions in the literature. We have identified these studies and used them to inform the methodologies to be used in our current research.

This article raises issues of ethics and validity and proposes methodologies for including children's voice and enabling their active participation in applied research into aspects of schooling. Examples are drawn from recent research and supplemented with observations arising from the current research in the SSC Network. We conclude by posing questions about the implications for validity and also for the impact of our research.

INTRODUCTION

The rights of children to express views on matters affecting them are enshrined in law, in codes of practice and in policy, placing an obligation on local authorities and schools to seek the views of children (DfES, 2001; Lewis, 2003). There is also an expectation that their voices will inform research, but limited documentation of how they might successfully be involved in this process (Brownlie, 2006). In this article, we consider how social capital might be used to access children's voices in applied research in educational contexts. The SSC Network is concerned with enhancing the participation of all key stakeholder groups, but especially children and families, in applied research into the development and use of social capital. Here we report on reviews of existing research on children's participation undertaken by Network participants and consider some of our own previous research on children's participation. We also report on a pilot study, involving children in one local authority, which explored issues of participation and the role of research in accessing children's voices. The evidence gathered from the reviews, previous research and the pilot study suggest that the exclusion of children and young people often arises from differences in social capital between teachers and pupils, and is replicated by policies and institutional arrangements that restrict opportunities for individuals to be heard. We conclude with a discussion of the role that social capital might play in enhancing access to children's voices and identify issues for consideration by researchers seeking to work with children of what to research and how.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CHILDREN'S VOICES

Central to Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam's definitions of social capital is the notion of belonging to and existing within the relational bonds of human society. This socialness is described as the 'durable network of... relationships (Bourdieu, 1983: 248), the 'social structure' (Coleman, 1994: 302), or 'social networks' (Putnam,

2000: 19). Socialness is the medium in which social capital operates, strengthens or diminishes. This relational context is a central feature of social capital, although these relational structures may vary in duration, density, distance and interconnectedness. Since educational links exist both within and beyond classrooms, the relational life of individual schools and their communities is the key element of social capital within the educational process. That these communities are themselves changing, with a school population that is reducing in number and becoming more ethnically diverse, and with a teaching population that is aging (Scottish Executive, 2004a) raises potentially problematic issues for the relational and social aspects of school life.

Coleman (1994) has defined social capital in the school context in terms of parental characteristics. This has led him to describe social capital in terms of ratios between children and parents, and to draw conclusions about what he considers to be the more limited access to social capital by single parents and between single parents and their children. These findings do not adequately address the confounding and, we suggest, pervasive effects of poverty, and create a risk of a victim blaming mentality among policy makers and practitioners. The social capital shared between parent and child is an important element but is only one of several linkages of crucial importance to a child within the school context. Furthermore, we do not accept that a simplistic ratio of children to parents is an adequate measure of the quality of such relationships. Unless we hear from the child and their parent about their experience of their relationship, we will not be able to distinguish between poverty and the effects of single parenthood on access to school and to outcomes of schooling. We also need to identify the child's experience of networks within the school setting, with peers and with teachers and other staff.

Research Review: Where are the Voices?

In reviewing applied education research, we have noted many papers involving initiatives in which teachers are engaged, but few in which the pupil's voice is heard. Some papers make passing reference to assumed benefits for young people, but most focus on outcomes of benefit to teachers. There may be an implication that there are benefits for young people, but there is little evidence that these benefits have been verified. Several researchers have contended that the 'hidden voices' (Aisncow, et al., 1999:139) are potentially informative and Ballard and McDonald (1999:97) urge researchers to alter the power relations within research to enable children and young people to collaborate in 'creating a shared understanding of aspects of their lives'. One of the components of the work in the first year of the SSC Network was a literature review of social capital research (Campbell, et al., 2006) which addressed the following questions:

- Is social capital defined in terms of individual, family, community, school, or regional or national level?
- What are the links between social capital and other forms of capital (economic, cultural, and human)?
- Is use made of notions of bridging, bonding or linking social capital?
- How are questions of power addressed? Do the researchers acknowledge their own power and address power relations among participants?
- To what extent are the multiple expectations of stakeholders addressed?

The group undertaking this review, which included members of higher education institutions (HEIs) and an individual from the voluntary sector, set criteria for the choice of research to review, namely that it was relevant to schooling and social capital, presented good quality research conducted in the preceding 10 years,

represented a range of voices and was of interest to the reviewer. Twenty five papers were reviewed in total. Eight of the research reports used interview methods, of which five can be described as ethnographic research, in that these studies considered the data over a period of time and used multi-data collection strategies. Not surprisingly only these eight reports included data from the research participants in the report. Respondents' voices are strongest in reports of research which had been conducted using ethnographic methodology rather than merely the involvement of some qualitative data. In contrast, purely quantitative studies often used language that was distant and described young people, especially those identified as disadvantaged, as research objects.

The perspectives of young people were largely absent from the research reviewed. Furthermore, most research tended to treat children as the passive recipients of social capital, and often their social capital was measured by quantifying their parents' social networks. Morrow's (2001) research is an exception as both the focus and methodology included young people. Her research with youth from England drew on young people's writing, images and conversations. The voices of these 13 to 16 year olds are strong, and can be heard throughout the report. Morrow investigated the young people's perceptions of:

- their social networks (eg. who is important to you and why?);
- their out-of-school activities;
- their sense of belonging (eg. how do you feel about way you live? Where do you feel you belong?);
- their understanding of friendship;
- their post-school aspirations;
- their perceptions and use of their neighbourhoods; and
- their participation in decision-making, both in school and in their wider communities.

The young people in Morrow's study cited the opportunities to forge social relationships as one of the most important benefits of schooling. Clearly, children and young people create, consolidate, destroy, erode and renegotiate their own social capital on a daily basis within schools, independently of their parents and teachers.

Another study by Farrell, et al. (2004) explicitly wished children to be seen as active social agents as proposed above, and they conducted informal conversations with children in Australia to gain a picture of their everyday lives. Unfortunately the voices of the children were not represented in the reviewed article.

A further review currently being undertaken within the SSC Network is focusing on policy on teacher professionalism and has examined in detail two policy documents relating to teaching and two concerned with social work. In each case, the child was constructed as either passive or as potentially the victim of incompetent professional practices. A recent review of the impact of equalities initiatives on education in Scotland since devolution (Menter, et al., 2006) investigated pupil perceptions as well as those of parents, teachers and professional bodies. Although schools facilitated this process, the pupils who participated in the focus group were mediated by the school structures: only upper school pupils who had available time were enabled to offer their views so the potentially enlightening comments of those pupils already marginalised were not heard.

POWER AND ETHICS IN RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

The lack of children's voice in much of the research in schools is in part an issue of power, and in part an issue of ethics. The relative power of the researcher and

those who are the object of research is one important distinction between research involving teachers or other adults, and research involving children. It is common and often a legal necessity to secure the permission of both the school authorities and also the parents or guardians of the children. However, this can be interpreted as placing the children under an obligation to participate because those with rights and responsibilities for their well-being have agreed to their participation. The informed consent of the children is sometimes assumed and their rights appear to be overlooked.

There is a certain ambiguity in the process of gaining consent, because it also requires gaining confidence and sharing trust. As adults we are at a considerable advantage, not only because we come with what some perceive as status conferred by our role as university researchers. We are introduced to the children by their class teacher, headteacher, or some other trusted adults, and with the consent of their parents. We may not know what has been said to the children by these significant adults, but often it seems that the children have had impressed upon them that the researcher is 'important' and it is an honour for their school or community to be taking part in this activity called research. This not only gives us an advantage in gaining their confidence, but can also influence what they say and how they say things. But more to the point, it means that the children are more or less co-opted on our behalf.

Those who agree on behalf of children to their involvement in research may expect some benefit to flow from the research, either to the school or to the community. It is important therefore to be open about the limited effect that research can have on public policy and practice. However, for those children who take part, there may be some benefit arising from increased awareness of the factors that impact upon their lives and especially on their learning experiences. All research has an impact on those who take part. Their participation is often seen as a special event, and sometimes the issues of focus for the research are ones that are not in the foreground of the daily experience of the children concerned. Hence, as researchers we have an obligation to recognise the effects of our practice. This requires considering how the research can be undertaken with minimal disruption and intrusions (David, et al., 2005), as well as how to seek informed consent. The latter is more than securing a signature on a form. Seeking the informed consent of young people is of itself a significant challenge, and this is especially the case when conducting research into the experiences of young people who are considered to be 'at risk'.

RESEARCHING CHILDREN'S VOICES IN SCHOOLS

Our previous work involving children and young people highlighted some of the challenges in obtaining their perspectives on matters concerning education, but reinforced the value of doing so because of the insights they offered.

Research by Smyth (2006) sought to discover the perspectives of young people from refugee and asylum seeking families being educated in Scotland and a number of complex issues emerged in the process of designing the research. Many of the young people spoke very little English and, with the exception of French, the researcher did not share any of their first languages. Translators were considered but rejected for a range of reasons including the need for the researcher to build up a trusting relationship with the young people. Many of the young people had little or no previous experience of school, or of the Scottish education system, having had either interrupted or no formal education in their country of origin. Attempts to compare systems would be meaningless in this context. The children involved in the research were aged between 6 and 12 years and the researcher needed to be sure they and their families understood how the data might be used. Families were often wary of questions that might be seen as associated with immigration legislation. Negotiation and informed consent took on additional importance.

Photographic logs were found to be a way of involving the young people in recording and discussing their experiences, while minimising the initial need for verbal interaction. The method gives them some control of the discourse and uses visual communication which may be attractive to other young people, and especially those for whom written forms of communication are not their preferred mode. It was decided to use digital photography rather than disposable cameras as this gave the young people control over the images they shared and discussed with the researcher. The learners (categorised as researchers for the duration of the project) worked in self-chosen groups of four and took up to 100 photos at a time in response to the initial brief of 'Things you like and don't like about school'. Before sharing these images with the researcher they edited their selection to include only those they wanted to show, and about which they had something to say.

The children produced a data set of around 150 photographs which they agreed they wished to share and discuss with the researcher. As the children became more proficient with the cameras and the editing software they began to use Photoshop to enhance or add graphics to their images and to create slide shows on specific themes to organise their thoughts. The slides were often annotated with comments from the pupils about the images they had taken. One short slide show was about the school janitor and the pupils' comments included 'He teaches us Glasgow'. They revealed that the janitor told them jokes in a Glasgow dialect and taught them words such as 'fitba' to help them to engage with others in the playground. Another comment about the janitor was 'He plays in the playground and everyone joins in'. The children also created a slide show of images of themselves in the mainstream classroom, with comments alongside including 'I want to show people my Scottish classroom when I go back to Iran' and 'I want to remember my friends when I am big.' The initial research question posed by the adult researcher was 'I want to know what you think about school in Scotland'. Further questions arose from the pupil researchers' photographic, written and oral responses to this question, resulting in the pupils having more control over the data received and used by the adults.

In research by Allan, et al. (2006), one primary head teacher in Scotland took the children's rights agenda beyond conventional approaches such as School Councils and Assemblies. She saw these as being limited in their effectiveness because they operated within existing school structures or 'bureaucratic spaces' of the school (Allan and I'Anson, 2004:126), and involved young people in replicating adult forms of decision-making. Over a period of 18 months, a group of researchers from the University of Stirling and Save the Children tracked activities and progress within the school (Allan and I'Anson, 2004; Allan, et al., 2006). The journey on which the various participants travelled was a complex one which involved discovering what did not work, as well as what did. The headteacher concluded that incorporating rights within the curriculum, rather than the bureaucratic spaces of the school, enabled children to explore their own conceptions of power and their place within school and to make connections with subject content. The most successful strategy was where children were able to experience and experiment with rights within ethical spaces. An example of this was the Special Needs Observation Group (SNOG: the pupils' name and their acronym), a pupil group led by a parent, which undertook to make the school a more inclusive place. They surveyed the school and identified a number of exclusionary barriers relating to the environment, structure and attitudes. The school was notified of these and asked to remove them, but inevitably the attitudinal barriers were the most difficult to challenge. The children reported they had achieved a great deal and for one child in particular, belonging to the SNOG group had enabled him to transform himself from being at risk of exclusion to someone who had responsibilities for others. He described how: 'I used to be, like, really, really bad. I used to fight everybody, but now I've calmed down because I've got a responsibility to look after them.' Towards the end of the research the members

of the SNOG group had broadened their concerns towards ensuring the inclusion of minority ethnic groups, and to minimising the unease felt by some people about their body shape when changing for gym.

Children in the school were taught about the significance of their rights and how these related to responsibilities, and this took a considerable amount of time within lessons and in school assemblies. More importantly, staff had to be encouraged, continuously, to let go of their safe hierarchies of authority, knowledge and power. This involved everyone in the school, including the janitor, dinner ladies, administrative staff and playground supervisors, and others who were connected with the school. For example, the community policeman was involved in the project and was encouraged to alter the way police engaged with children. As in Smyth's research, the janitor was an important connection and source of support. A key change for some of the adults in the school was refraining from shouting at children. It took some time before the children acquired the confidence to exercise their rights, but they gradually became more assertive and were more inclined to knock on the head teacher's door with issues and, importantly, potential solutions. Towards the end of the research period, the head teacher was becoming more ambitious about extending children's rights still further to include them on interview panels for staff appointments and, at a future date, allowing children to chair their own care or special needs case reviews. These ideas were likely to cause some discomfort within the local authority hierarchies, and indeed the notion of children interviewing staff had already been vetoed by the Council, but the head teacher intended to persevere. The experience in this school highlighted the time and effort it takes to shift teacher/student relationships and the challenge it presents to adults to relinquish familiar and habitual structures and ways of working.

Both pieces of research, whilst not undertaken from a social capital perspective, revealed interesting aspects of social capital upon re-examination. The young refugees and asylum seekers had a strong sense of their Scottish context, and the connections within it, and saw the research as enabling them to preserve some images to convey back to friends and family in their native countries. The janitor had been an important source of social capital to these young people, offering insider information on dialect and local culture which strengthened their engagement with other pupils. The janitor had also been a significant source of social capital in the research of Allan, et al., along with other adults. The disability group, SNOG, had provided a major opportunity to build linking social capital, arguably the most profitable kind, because it involved the young people in making connections with their teachers and challenging power structures within the school by asking them to change certain practices. Both studies reinforced the value of obtaining young people's voices, but considerable work had been necessary to build up trust with the young people. The challenge in the SSC Network is even greater, since it involves trying to find ways of talking to children and young people about trust.

CHILDREN'S VOICES ON SOCIAL CAPITAL

The voices of children and young people are crucial to understanding the nature of social capital within schools. Common denominators identified in definitions of social capital include trust, feelings of belonging and being valued, and networks of quality interaction, and it is these aspects which we sought to explore with children and young people.

In a pilot study (Catts, et al., 2006), ten young people in P7 (last year of Scottish primary education) were asked to tell the adult interviewer what trust meant to them. The main objective was to clarify what was meant by social capital for pupils (and teachers and parents) in the context of schooling. The precise question they were asked was: What does the word 'trust' mean to you? Their answers indicated that trust was reserved for 'best friends'. In one case out of ten, the student volunteered

the class teacher as trustworthy, when asked who they trusted in their class (a follow-up question). In one other case, the student identified 'responsibility' as an element of trust and appeared to answer in terms of how he understood his parents used the word trust. This child had added responsibilities for younger siblings in the family. For all other pupils, the answers identified the notion of keeping secrets which therefore appears to be central to their concept of trust. Other notions raised by individual pupils were 'not lying to you' (2), not 'telling on you' (2), 'not talking about you' (2), and helping you to be O.K. or looking out for you (2).

In this process we have begun to access the children's language about trust. This can strengthen our understanding of how trust is perceived by young people. Follow-up questions suggest to us that trust is perceived not as an absolute but as a relative concept by these P7 pupils. For instance some described peers as 'sometimes' telling secrets. It appears therefore that like many adults, they may distinguish levels of trust and distrust.

One strategy for enhancing adult understanding of the pupils' voice is to engage with other children as participant researchers and we have begun to explore this process. First, we anonymised the text of transcripts, and then we read these through with two young people of a similar age from another community, and asked them to comment on what was being said. They identified nuances in meanings in words that we had missed, and sometimes suggested that the responses were not what the person 'really means'. This alerted us to where young people may be offering responses which they thought we wanted to hear. They also confirmed the veracity of statements as being applicable to many pupils, helping us identify themes that may prove salient to a wider population. For instance, the quote 'Somebody that wouldn't say stuff behind your back' was identified as meaning they will not make up false statements about the person – as opposed to telling things that are secrets and true. It was also suggested by the reviewing pupils that keeping secrets was not as absolute as was indicated in the quotes. They emphasised that there is a distinction between a promise to keep a secret and the outcome, because things can slip out accidentally.

HOW DO WE ADDRESS CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO BE HEARD?

The reviews of research conducted within the SSC Network, consideration of our previous research involving children and young people, and pilot work suggest that addressing children's right to be heard within applied research is a challenging, yet rewarding process. Social capital, as well as being the substantive focus for the research being undertaken within the SSC Network, appears to be a useful vehicle for accessing the views of children and young people because of its relational features. We have identified a number of issues in terms of what research should be undertaken with children and young people and how it should be undertaken.

These will inform the design of a series of case studies of social capital in informal and formal educational settings to be conducted by the SSC Network, but we anticipate them being of interest to researchers more widely.

On the question of what research to do with young people, our immediate concern is with social capital and we are alert to the urgent need for clarity on a number of counts:

- the identification of different populations and groupings and their assumed characteristics;
- the characteristics of 'disadvantage' and its relationship with educational achievement;
- the distinction between children and young people's social capital and that of their parents and of other adults; and
- the process by which children and young people acquire different kinds of

social capital.

Although there has been some evidence (Morgan and Sorenson, 1999) of an association between the density of student networks and mathematics achievement, there does not seem to have been any investigation of the processes which increase the density of student networks.

The question of how to undertake research with children and young people is more complex. In-depth qualitative studies are likely to be highly instructive as they will allow for the processes of formation and consolidation of social capital to be observed and documented. Involving children and young people in the actual research process could help to ensure things that are salient to them are not missed. More importantly, involving them in this way could help to address some of the significant power imbalances. Changing the relations between adults and children, and engaging children as stakeholders in the process of knowledge production involves a shift from research on children to research with children. We recognise that this is an enormous shift but consider it to be one which is worth making.

A key dimension, in addressing children's right to be heard within research, is power. When the existing structures, and their attendant power relations, are challenged, there seems to be more likelihood of children recognising the value of being asked for their views and taking the process seriously. In other words trust, which is central to social capital, is at the heart of the process of engaging with children and young people in research. Pedder and McIntyre (2006) have endorsed the value of using a social capital framework in work with children and young people and Fielding (2001) proposes a frame of analysis for addressing power in research. He asks: who is speaking and who is listening? He also asks about scope and intent for actions. Reay (2006) argues that there is a place for consultation with pupils to be conducted by researchers external to the school rather than directly by teachers themselves, whilst also proposing collaboration between teachers and researchers to address concerns raised by pupils in this process. The children we have worked with have shown themselves to be highly capable in engaging with us in discussions about social capital and alerting us to our own confusions and misrecognitions. We are confident that they will help to steer us through some of the conceptual murkiness of social capital and to develop understandings which will be of relevance and of use to researchers and practitioners in Scottish education.

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