From "student voice" to "youth–adult partnerships": Lessons from working with young people as partners for educational change

An NZCER working paper from the Families and Communities Engagement in Education (FACE) project

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Abstract

This working paper describes a series of recent "student voice" projects undertaken by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER). Although these projects varied in terms of their specific contexts and processes, each sought to elicit young people's perspectives (about learning, education and/or other aspects of their lives), and support the young people to represent their perspectives and insights in forums that included adults, such as teachers, parents, policymakers or others who work with youth. The projects had multiple goals, the most profound of which was to create space for future-focused dialogue about doing education "differently" to better fit learning needs for the 21st century. Looking back across these projects, we ask ourselves two questions. First, how successful was each project as a learning opportunity for the young people? Second, how successful was each project in engaging adult audiences who might be potential collaborators with, and advocates for, involving young people in educational decision making? Based on our analysis, we argue that the way forward requires us to dispense with the clichéd notion of "student voice", and instead reframe our past and future work in terms of "youth–adult partnerships". Analyses of some of our other research projects suggest that youth–adult partnerships can and do already occur in some school contexts. However, we speculate that the concept of youth–adult partnerships may prove challenging for some schools, as it contradicts common "school ways" of thinking about the roles of adults and youth.

Introduction

Over the past few years NZCER has undertaken several projects which we have referred to as "student voice" (SV) or "students as researchers" (SAR) projects. In each project we worked directly with groups of young people (usually aged between 10 and 18), supporting them to research their own and others' views, ideas and experiences, and represent this knowledge in forums that included adults, such as teachers, parents, policymakers or others who work with youth in various capacities. These projects had multiple goals, the most profound of which was to provoke and unsettle some commonly held beliefs about education and schooling among all

participants, and create space to begin thinking and talking about doing education "differently" to better fit learning needs for the 21st century. Looking back across these projects we have come to recognise some of the assumptions that underpinned our approaches and how these have either supported or worked against our goals. This paper outlines our motives for seeking to engage students in educational debate and dialogue within a framework of "future focused" ideas about learning for the 21st century. I then look at some contemporary ideas about "student voice" and "students as researchers" and why our approaches to date seem to have been limited in their capacity to effect transformative change in education. I argue that we need to leave behind the notion of "student voice", and instead reframe our past and future work in terms of "youth–adult partnerships". I speculate that the concept of youth–adult partnerships may prove challenging for some schools, as it contradicts common "school ways" of thinking about the roles of adults and youth.

Context: The Families and Communities Engagement in Education (FACE) project

This working paper is part of NZCER's Families and Communities Engagement in Education (FACE) project, which is exploring how and why communities might engage more actively in shaping schools' curriculum, in accordance with the "community engagement" principle of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007).[1] Although schools have historically used a range of mechanisms to inform and consult families and communities, FACE is premised on the notion that such community engagement ought to be based on an explicitly "future focused" framework[2]—another principle of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Ally Bull, the leader of the FACE project, argues on the basis of future-focused literature that "if we are to continue to develop and prosper as a nation … we need to think differently about schools and what they do, and also about how and why our public services in general should be provided. Through this lens, 'community engagement' involves much more than informing or consulting with parents—it involves community participation in debate about how education contributes to the public good" (Bull, 2010, p. 3).

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[1]   This principle is expressed as follows: "Community engagement: The curriculum has meaning for students, connects with their wider lives, and engages the support of their families, whānau, and communities" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8). The role of families and communities is further identified in a number of other places in *The New Zealand Curriculum*. For example "The specific ways in which [curriculum] values find expression in an individual school will be guided by dialogue between the school and its community … When the school community has developed strongly held and clearly articulated values, those values are likely to be expressed within the school" (p. 10) "Students learn as they engage in shared activities and conversations with other people, including family members and people in the wider community" (p. 34) and "Curriculum design and review is a continuous, cyclic process. It involves making decisions about how to give effect to the national curriculum in ways that best address the particular needs, interests and circumstances of the school's students and community. It requires a clear understanding of the intentions for *The New Zealand Curriculum* and of the values and expectations of the community" (p. 37).

[2]   This principle is expressed in *The New Zealand Curriculum* as follows: "The curriculum encourages students to look to the future by exploring such significant future-focused issues as sustainability, citizenship, enterprise, and globalisation." (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8)

The future-focused literature posits that because numerous social, environmental, technological and economic shifts have made the 21st century world increasingly complex, diverse and uncertain, schooling needs to change substantially if it is to adequately prepare people for successful lives within well-functioning societies (Brady, 2008; Delors, 1998; Gilbert, 2005; Kress, 2008; Miller, 2003; Rychen & Salganik, 2003). Gilbert (2005) discusses the implications for education in terms of a shift away from "Industrial Age" ways of thinking in favour of "Knowledge Age" ways of thinking. In the Industrial Age the knowledge necessary to function successfully and follow a career was seen to already exist: it could be handed down from experts and leaders to learners and workers. In the Industrial Age, curriculum development was a matter of selecting the most important knowledge to transmit to students; experts decided what knowledge to mass-prescribe and in which sequence. These ways of thinking about curriculum underpin various deeply embedded systems, structures and practices in today's schooling, particularly in secondary schools (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2008).

However, future-focused literature suggests that this model for schooling and curriculum is no longer sufficient, and it is no longer possible to accurately predict exactly what knowledge people will need to draw on as they move through life, particularly given the rapid pace at which new knowledge is developing, career possibilities are proliferating, communities are diversifying and social, economic and environmental challenges are becoming increasingly complex. Indeed, people's ability to generate new ideas/solutions/practices/ways-of-being through relationships with other people and other ideas is the key resource for economic—and social—development, and may be the only viable pathway for addressing the increasingly pressing environmental problems of the 21st century.[3] Schools are responsible for preparing students to participate, contribute and flourish amidst these challenges and opportunities.

In association with shifting conceptions of knowledge, there has been increasing support for the idea of moving from highly centralised curriculum design and decision making, towards various degrees of school-based development (Bolstad, 2004), and curriculum development that involves community-driven decision making (Warren, Hoong, Leung Rubin, & Sychitkokhong Uy, 2009) and personalising learning (Leadbeater, 2006). This has meant a shift from a "prescriptive" curriculum that sets out and standardises knowledge for all (i.e., the inputs are clearly set out) towards more of an "outcomes" curriculum that outlines high-level intentions and visions but enables far more diversity in input and design. Extending the ideas above, international theorists have been calling for a greater democratisation of public services (such as education) to better reflect and serve diversity, uncertainty and the need for just-in-time decision making (Parker & O'Leary, 2006; Seltzer & Bentley, 1999; Stoll & Louis, 2007). Whether through face-to-face dialogue processes, or through electronic social technologies, the idea is that open-ended solutions and systems changes need to come from collaborative problem solving by and for the people closest to any given context. As old institutional hierarchies and sector delineations dissolve, decision making can no longer be seen as the sole responsibility of school principals and/or governments. Drawing on the idea of "deliberative democracy" (as opposed to representational democracy), it is suggested that people from across every spectrum in society—including young

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[3] For a much more detailed explanation of the Knowledge Age ideas and their implications for education, see Gilbert (2005) and Bolstad and Gilbert (2008).

people—should be engaged in shaping public institutions, including education. Advocates of deliberative democracy believe this approach can allow for greater equity in input, and justice in output (Roberts & Bolstad, 2010), particularly as societies become increasingly diverse, multicultural and globalised.

Returning to the main focus of this paper; I believe that approaches to support families' and communities' engagement in education must also involve students' input and engagement. Several bodies of theory underpin approaches to involving students in educational decision making. The next section discusses various rationales that tend to underpin approaches to eliciting "student voice" or supporting "students as researchers"[4].

What ideas underpin "student voice" and "students as researchers"?

The idea that young people should have a say on a range of local and national matters—including education—has become increasingly popular and embedded over the last few decades (Bragg, 2007; Fielding, 2009; Fielding & Bragg, 2003). Activities and initiatives designed to consult young people, elicit student voice or support students as researchers stem from a range of legal, political, academic, economic and social motivations. Below I present an adapted version of Bragg's (2007) summary of the main rationales. As Bragg points out, in practice most motivations for consulting with young people and engaging young peoples' voices involve a mix of many or all of these.

International rights-based legal models and frameworks

Children's advocacy organisations often draw on The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as the basis for their work with and for young people, stressing "young peoples' intrinsic rights as autonomous individuals deserving of equality, choice, respect, and consideration" (Bragg, 2007, p. 12). UNCRC was adopted by the United Nations in 1989, and ratified in all but two member states[5] within a few years (New Zealand ratified UNCRC in 1993). Under Article 12 of the UNCRC, children have the right to express opinions and have their views taken into account in any matter impacting on their wellbeing. This view of children "as 'social actors' who can form and express opinions, participate in decision-making processes and influence solutions" sits alongside a more familiar view of children as objects of concern, who are in need of protection and provision (Bragg, 2007, p. 11). This rights-based rationale contrasts with more instrumentalist rationales which emphasise the benefits of youth participation for the young people themselves, and for the organisations and society that support their involvement. These are outlined below.

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[4] In this paper, *SAR* refers to initiatives in which students are supported to undertake research about their own (or other students') educational experiences, for the purposes of improving these experiences or addressing educational problems. It does not include students undertaking research as part of their curriculum learning, when this is unrelated to improving educational provision (e.g., undertaking research for an English or science project).

[5] The exceptions are Somalia and the United States.

Development of young peoples' capabilities to participate (the "citizenship agenda")

This rationale for consulting and involving youth "puts the emphasis on young people developing skills of participation in their schools and wider communities", which Bragg (2007, p. 14) describes as "the citizenship agenda". The argument is that involving young people in decision making "is not only about recognising their rights, but also about developing skills of participation in their schools and wider communities" (Bragg, 2007, p. 14), with the hope that this will help to prepare them for a live of active civic involvement.

Changing academic views about children and youth

Bragg notes that interest in young peoples' perspectives "has been further stimulated by significant conceptual and theoretical developments … in how children are viewed and understood within the social sciences" (2007, p. 15). There has been a shift away from considering children and young people "either in relation to larger entities of which they are a part (such as families, schools, or nations) or as 'becomings' (that is, as persons growing to reach mature adulthood, of interest primarily because of who they are and what they will become in the future" (Bragg, 2007, p.15), and instead, children are increasingly positioned in the social sciences as fully formed beings "whose present ideas, approaches to life, choices, and relationships are of interest in their own right" (Bragg, 2007, p. 15). Important dimensions of this shift include the idea that young people are participants in, and producers of, social and cultural change, and the idea that young peoples' views of the world may be significantly different to adults'. Putting these two ideas together underscores the value to social researchers of understanding youth culture and perspectives.

Young people as consumers/clients

Market models for youth consultation draw on the ideas above, often focusing on young peoples' perspectives and behaviour in a consumer culture in order to improve the development or sales of products and services. Bragg (2007, p. 16) notes that marketing models also infiltrate public services, "with children, as well as adults, being redefined as …'consumers' of the services and goods they receive"—for example, health and education.

Benefits to adults and organisations from listening to young people

This rationale emphasises the benefits to adults and organisations who consult young people, including shifting adults' perceptions of young people's capabilities, supporting adults to become better at communicating with and learning from young people and, at the organisational level, developing better services, practices or structures through the input of young peoples' ideas and expertise.

Personal development and educational value

This rationale for consulting and involving youth emphasises the personal benefits to the young people (including increased confidence; sense of inclusion and responsibility; development of participation, collaboration and decision-making skills; ability to work with others and reflect on one's own thinking etc). Involving young people in identifying, researching, debating and developing solutions to improve their own and other peoples' educational experiences provides

the kind of real-world learning context that Gilbert (2005) and others argue 21st century learners ought to have, as preparation for learning, working and living in today's world.

Rationales driven by particular curriculum, pedagogy and assessment theories

Hipkins (2010) discusses several applications of "student voice" which, although interlinked with a number of the previous rationales, are more likely to be familiar to teachers in association with particular pedagogical traditions. For example, constructivist theories of learning suggest teachers cannot know exactly what or how students have learned unless students are consulted about the meanings they have made from any particular learning experience(s), hence student voice is necessary for determining "next learning steps" and how teachers can support students to take these next steps. "Inquiry learning" pedagogies promote the idea of involving students in identifying and pursuing "questions that interest them and, at best, link meaningfully to their lives beyond school" (Hipkins, 2010, p. 86).

Recent NZCER "student voice" and "students as researchers" projects

Below, I briefly describe three of NZCER's recent SV/SAR projects. As with many SV/SAR initiatives, our projects were underpinned by a mixture of the rationales discussed above, and with hindsight we can see how a clearer articulation of these rationales at the outset might have been beneficial. Nevertheless, our larger overarching goal has consistently been to help involve young people in the process of discussion, debate and action to transform educational practices and thinking to better fit with the "future-focused" ideas discussed at the beginning of this paper. Each project description is followed by a table summarising some of the successes and challenges of the projects in two areas: First, how successful were they in terms of their impacts for the young people? Did they seem to develop the young peoples' skills, confidence and ability to reflect on their own thinking? Did they provoke the young people to question their (or other peoples') existing ideas and assumptions about issues such as education, schooling, knowledge and learning? Second, how successful were they in engaging adults and creating space for further youth involvement and participation in debating and decision making?

"Student as researchers" in two FACE project schools

Between 2008 and 2010, two researchers from our team worked with small groups of junior secondary students at two secondary schools over a series of weeks and months, helping them to research and think about teaching and learning practices in their school and, eventually, to give a presentation to an audience of teachers and parents.[6] Our goal was to pilot a process designed to support these students to participate as equals in the development of their school's learning community, and this goal was one strand of the FACE project.[7] The processes and outcomes of

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[6] At each school, a teacher also collaborated with the students, providing guidance and continuity for students in between our sessions with them. In both cases, the teachers continued to work with student groups after our involvement ended, although we have not yet returned to the schools to gather data about the nature of the ongoing work.

[7] In addition to working with students in two schools, we gathered baseline data from four schools on teachers', parents' and students' perceptions of the relationship between school, student and family and the purpose of

this work are reported in detail in Roberts and Bolstad (2010). Due to time and budgetary constraints, our engagement with the schools tapered off after the students had presented to their teachers and parents, although the possibility remained open to continue working with the schools in some way. As part of the FACE project, we may request a follow-up with the schools to look at the longer-term outcomes and impacts of this process, and how the school has (or has not) picked up on the process that we helped to initiate. Table 1 summarises successes and challenges of this project.

Table 1 **Successes and challenges of the "students as researchers" project**

Impacts in terms of the young peoples' thinking and development	**Impacts in terms of engaging adults and achieving greater input from youth in decision making**
Successes	**Successes**
• The process was successful at challenging the students' thinking about education and curriculum, provoking them to question current school practices and building their confidence and experience to share their views and their research with others (staff and parents).	• Staff and parents who attended the students' presentations appeared engaged and asked the students questions.
Challenges	**Challenges**
• Students' thinking often mixed together sophisticated and naïve ideas about the challenges for education and how to address these.	• Schools said the students' views and contributions were important, but time and resourcing for this work was fairly minimal.
	• The work was contained within a few small groups—it was not supported by school-wide curriculum and timetabling planning. Students worked in their own time or had to miss other scheduled classes.
	• After the students presented their work, "next steps" were not necessarily self-evident to the schools, nor to us.

Whakarongo mai: Stories from the inside

In 2010 NZCER collaborated with the Young People's Reference Group (YPRG)[8] from the Office of the Children's Commissioner[9] (OCC) and the Cognition Institute on a project which later came to be called Whakarongo Mai—Listening In: Stories from the Inside. Adult mentors from NZCER, Cognition and the OCC supported the young people to research and write about their experiences of schooling. Their stories were posted on the Cognition Institute's website, and the young people and their stories were heavily featured in a one-day symposium involving teachers,

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education, with the intention of tracking the processes each school adopted to engage its community and how people thought about community engagement.

[8] At the time, the group comprised eight young people aged 14–18 from different parts of New Zealand.

[9] See http://www.occ.org.nz/young_peoples_space/yprg

principals, students, sector leaders, researchers, policy makers and community representatives. The aim of the symposium "was to consider how the profession can attract, train, energise, improve and value the sort of teachers schools in Aotearoa New Zealand will need over the next few years"[10].

Table 2 **Successes and challenges of the Whakarongo Mai project**

Impacts in terms of the young peoples' thinking and development	Impacts in terms of engaging adults and achieving greater input from youth in decision-making
Successes • The YPRG students were already used to contributing their perspectives on issues relating to youth. • The students learned how to seek and use evidence, prior research, literature, etc. to construct an argument (not just give their opinion/make claims). **Challenges** • Working towards a written output of publishable quality with novice writers. • Tight timeframe. With a longer timeframe students might have been able to conduct further research in their area of interest.	**Successes** • Very strong support and advocacy from the supporting organisations meant that the students' work was showcased very publicly, and its significance was touted by these advocates. • Students, and their work, were showcased at the Cognition Institute symposium, one student essay was published in the local newspaper and Cognition is continuing to take the student work to other audiences, e.g., educational policymakers etc. • Cognition Symposium participants gave strongly positive feedback about the students' contributions and presence. **Challenges** • The ongoing impact of the work and the young peoples' likelihood of staying engaged in this work is unclear, as the YPRG membership changes every 2 years. • The YPRG are a small group from all over the country; it is uncertain how their work will lead to greater student involvement in the wider context of New Zealand schools.

Digital storytelling in the Youth Connectedness project

This project was designed to collect data on young people's "connectedness" to family, friends, community and school, and its relationship to their "wellbeing".[11] We supported 41 participants (ages 10–17) to make digital stories about themselves once a year for three years. The digital stories were intended to complement other forms of data collected through surveys and in-depth interviews. During the first two years, the stories were only viewed by the young people and the research team, and occasionally, with the young peoples' permission, were shown at education and research conferences. As we approached the third and final iteration of the digital storytelling (and the end of the project) we decided to invite the young people to create their final digital stories to be shown at a private screening in a city theatre. The invited audience for the screening was the students, their friends and families, the research team, and various people associated with or interested in the Youth Connectedness project. The

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[10] The symposium was convened by the Cognition Institute in November 2010, and attended by 85 participants, including members of the YPRG.

[11] See http://www.vuw.ac.nz/youthconnectedness/

young people were asked to reflect on their involvement in the project, and in particular, the digital storytelling component, in a final in-depth interview at the conclusion of the project. The use of digital storytelling as a research methodology was very much an exploratory endeavour for NZCER, and the motivations, challenges, and outcomes of the digital storytelling project are discussed in more depth in Bolstad (manuscript submitted for publication).

Table 3 **Successes and challenges for the digital storytelling project**

Impacts in terms of the young peoples' thinking and development	Impacts in terms of engaging adults and greater input from youth in decision making
Successes • Mixed success but also hard to judge success. Some students produced quite thoughtful stories and also indicated that the project had impacted their thinking about themselves in various ways. • Other students' stories revealed less of their point of view, and interviews similarly did not give a clear indication about whether the project made the young people any more conscious of their own thought processes or patterns in their lives. **Challenges** • The project was framed in terms of students telling us "their" story, so our framing was minimal. The trade-off was that we couldn't really "force" transformational learning/changes in the young people's thinking or push their stories in any particular direction. • The project was not really centred on questions about students' *educational* experiences, but rather their total experiences as a young person, including in relation to their families, friends and interests.	**Successes** • The digital stories seemed to have emotional resonance for a variety of audiences: other researchers/policymakers who work with youth, students' families, and teachers shown the stories at conferences. • The stories were useful for promoting discussions with audiences (including young people, although we provoked group discussions with them about other people's stories, not their own). **Challenges** • Sharing of the stories was limited by the ethical considerations/agreements we made with the young people about how and to whom the stories would be shared (see Bolstad, manuscript submitted for publication). • To do something further "with" the stories re: engaging wider audiences would probably require a planned/structured methodology.

What have we learned from our SV/SAR projects?

The condensed summaries above omit much of the important contextual detail about each project, including rationales, processes and outcomes (but see Bolstad, 2010; manuscript submitted for publication; Roberts & Bolstad, 2010). However, at a high level we can draw some conclusions about what have been the most and least successful aspects. First, we believe we have been successful in designing workshop processes that support young people to have meaningful learning experiences. We have seen students quickly reach new and deep insights about themselves, their peers and their schooling experiences when they are supported to investigate big questions about teaching, learning and curriculum, and to consider how they might have more input into shaping decisions that affect them. Developing these abilities to think critically about education is a crucial step on the journey of becoming "lifelong learners", one of the goals of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). Table 4 shows three principles which were particularly important for guiding our approaches (particularly in the "student voice" and "Whakarongo Mai—Listening In" projects).

Table 4 **Principles underpinning our SV/SAR work**

Starting with students' own experiences and interests: We encouraged students to focus their research and reflection on areas they are knowledgeable and passionate about. This signalled that their experiences and thoughts were valued. By supporting them to unpack their own ideas, we sought to model research skills and deepen conversations about education, teaching and learning as we built a sense of trust and co-ownership of the process.

Bringing together our knowledge and students' knowledge: Given our knowledge and expertise, we were in a position to provide training and skills development in the principles of research to support students to express and reflect on their views. We were also able to share our knowledge about educational theory, including ideas linked to a "future focus" in education. We try to be explicit about our own knowledge areas and what we can do to support students, but continuously reaffirm that we are also learning from the students.

Sharing information about the processes and outcomes of the students' work with adults: It was important for students, and for us, that the results of our work together was shared with others, particularly adults who work with young people (school leaders, teachers and other stakeholders in education), parents and families, and other students. In the three projects above, methods for sharing the young peoples' research findings, perspectives and opinions included oral presentations, written essays and digital stories.

However, we are not under the illusion that our work with students was necessarily "transformative", in the sense of having a profound impact and change in the young peoples' thinking; nor in the sense of creating significant changes in their schools or in the schools' engagement with the community. As researchers, we also encountered a range of tensions and questions about the viability of our approaches for engaging students as co-contributors to education design.

Tension 1: Reifying students' "naïve" claims versus inculcating them into "our" paradigm: One of the challenges we faced was balancing our aim of asking students to express and represent their views with our aim to give them access to the "big-picture" and "future-focused" ideas about education and society that we think are important, but not widely understood in the community nor in schools (as outlined at the beginning of this paper). This lead us to wonder whether our collaborative approaches might produce an unintentional co-opting of students into existing frames of thinking (i.e., teaching students to see things in "school" ways or "researcher" ways of thinking *instead of* in students' ways).

Tension 2: Presenting views versus entering into dialogue: The primary aim of the FACE project was to work towards establishing learning communities where teachers, parents, students and other partners could engage equitably in conversations. However, it has been a struggle to move beyond the "consultation" model in which different groups are asked to present their views, and move towards real-time problem solving and shared decision making—arguably because neither we nor the schools we worked with had a clear pathway in mind for how this might actually occur.

Tension 3: Creating expectations for change versus managing expectations about change: The youth participation literature suggests that authentic student participation should lead to action, but in any project like this change is likely to be gradual, emergent—and sometimes nonexistent. One challenge our projects to date have not addressed is how to ensure that there are good feedback processes in the future so that students can hear about any long-term changes and impacts that their work may have contributed to.

Tension 4: Meaning making versus destabilising experiences: The opportunities for inquiry into the bigger picture context helped some young people to "make sense" of their educational experiences but, at the same time, we were aware that without adequate support this might have the potential to destabilise them if their educational experiences do not live up to their new ideals.

Tension 5: Quick broad coverage versus long-term in-depth investigation: In most of our projects, we worked with the young people for a limited time and attempted to cover a lot of ground quickly, in the hope that students or the school might find something of particular interest to follow up on in more depth. We wonder how can work like this better align with the principles of 21st century learning: for example, giving students opportunities to generate new knowledge by carrying out authentic tasks in real-world contexts; foregrounding the agency, responsibility and transformative potential of the learner; and providing opportunities to help students see the "big picture" (Gilbert, 2005)?

Tension 6: Working *in* schools versus working *with* schools: There are both benefits and drawbacks to being "outsiders" working with students, rather than being teachers or school leaders. On the one hand we are able to offer a perspective that is quite different from that of school leaders, teachers or students. On the other hand, for change to be sustainable it seems to us that it should be driven from within a school, not by external visitors (Although Mitra, 2009b makes a case for "intermediary organisations" to support student voice initiatives). This has led us to wonder how teachers, students and researchers can develop the skills that are necessary for this work (particularly when it goes beyond the traditional roles and experiences of each).

Tension 7: Students as connectors versus students as contributors: In the "student voice" subcomponent of FACE, in particular, we set out to support students to become contributors to conversations about education design, but as the project progressed, they were increasingly positioned as connectors for conversations between other parties, such as schools and families. If students are seen as a "lever" for engaging parents and families in dialogue with the school, we wonder, how can schools avoid "tokenism" (i.e., valuing students not for their input, but for their strategic value as connectors between other groups)?

Tension 8: Which students' "voices" are heard? Which students participate in these kinds of initiatives? As others have pointed out, often "student voice" or "students as researchers" initiatives involve a limited range of young people, particularly if it places high demands on individuals (Bragg, 2007). In all the projects described above we aimed to work with groups of students with diverse backgrounds, experiences, interests, cultures and educational histories. Yet this does not mean that those students' perspectives and experiences can be taken to represent a single, homogeneous "student voice". Hadfield and Haw (2000, 2001, cited in Bragg, 2007) suggest the term "voice" is used to mean many things, and propose a typology of three kinds of voice: authoritative, critical and therapeutic. While an "authoritative" voice aims to represent (a) particular group(s) perspective, and a "therapeutic" voice validates and supports the speakers' own experiences, a "critical" voice is often about "challenging existing policies, practices and views or stereotypes of a group or issue, and is more concerned with presenting unheard or alternative views" (Bragg, 2007, p. 22). Orner (1992, cited in Bragg, 2007, p. 23) argues that student voice approaches may not take into account the intersection of identity, language, context and power

that informs all pedagogical relations, thus "perpetuat[ing] relations of domination in the name of liberation".

The biggest limitation of our SV/SAR projects to date, we think, is that each has left us wondering how to transition from being something small and interesting that happens on the margins of the core business of schooling, to something that has the potential to shift that core business towards the "future-focused" ideas outlined at the beginning of this paper. In the final section of this paper I explain why it may be helpful to move away from the language of SV/SAR and instead reframe our intentions in terms of concepts of "youth–adult partnership".

Why youth–adult partnerships?

Many authors express aversion to the term "student voice" due, as this paper has discussed, to the mixture of multiple and often divergent rationales that sit beneath various SV/SAR approaches (Fielding, 2009; Lundy, 2007; Mitra, 2009a). For these authors, the most problematic issue is that "student voice" approaches may not address underlying power differences between young people and adults—particularly in contexts where adult and youth roles are already tightly framed within a particular construct that has a strong power differential embedded within it (the roles of teachers and students in schools, for example). The idea of "consulting young people" (including in noneducational settings, e.g., local government) is similarly critiqued for its potential to limit young peoples' involvement to providing a point of view or perspective, with no guarantee that their input will be taken into account nor that they will have input into subsequent decisions.

"Youth–adult partnerships" are described by authors such as Mitra (2009a, 2009b) "as relationships in which both youth and adults have the potential to contribute to decision-making processes, to learn from one another, and to promote change (Jones & Perkins, 2004, cited in Mitra, 2009a). "Student voice" can, of course, be a subset of youth–adult partnerships, but the latter term originates in the youth development field (Mitra, 2009a), and is strongly anchored in the rights-based frameworks for child/youth participation derived from UNCRC. While youth–adult partnership approaches endorse redressing the common power differentials that exist between adults and young people, it is important to state that this does not necessarily mean that adults and children/youth can or should have *equal* roles or responsibilities.

Lundy (2007, p. 929) suggests that adult resistance to approaches that would enable young people to fully enjoy their rights to participation (e.g., as expressed in UNCRC) may stem from one of three types of concerns:

• scepticism about children's capacity to have meaningful input into decision making
• concern that giving children more control will undermine authority and destabilise the school environment
• concerns that it will require too much effort that would be better spent on education itself.

However, adults' conscious or subconscious views are not the only obstacles. Many structures and practices that define typical school culture are simply not conducive to youth–adult partnership thinking. Some examples of the tensions between youth-development approaches and power structures and practices conventionally at play in schools are briefly summarised in Table 5 below.

Table 5 **Comparison between youth development/youth–adult partnership approaches and conventional school culture**

	Youth development/youth–adult partnership approaches	Conventional "school culture"
Group size and ratio of adults to youth	Mitra (2009a, 2009b) suggests the ideal size is 10–15 youth working with 1–2 (or more) adults.	1 adult teacher typically works with a class of 30 students.
Relationships	Adults and young people are partners, with different expertises. All partners are not "equal" as in identical, but everyone has something to contribute.	Teacher is the authority, students are directed by the teacher.
Youth culture/youth issues	Viewed as a fundamental component of the youth–adult partnership—and the adults need to be interested in and sensitive to youth culture and youth issues and value these as resources for the joint work of the group.	At best, youth culture and youth issues are integrated into curriculum and teaching in order to make learning relevant and engaging for students. At worst, youth culture and youth issues are seen as interfering with the "real work" of teaching and learning the curriculum.
Core purpose	Developing students' capabilities, knowledge and experience in the context of a project where students are leaders and changemakers (addressing problems within their schools, or addressing the challenge of getting "student voice" into educational decision making, or addressing some other social justice or community or youth-related challenge).	Teaching students through the curriculum.

Hipkins (2010) p. 94) argues that no matter how supportive of the idea of "student voice" teachers may or may not be, they are "unlikely to arrive at a complex and multifaceted understanding … without the support of professional learning programmes that are demonstrably grounded in practice yet also build coherent bridges to theory". We extend Hipkins' argument to include both "student voice" and "youth–adult partnerships". We also apply Hipkins' challenge to ourselves as researchers (and as representatives of other groups and organisations outside schools) who value the idea of involving students in educational decision making. In a subsequent working paper I will elaborate further on the kinds of contexts and theories that may allow youth–adult partnership ways of thinking to play out in schools, speculate what these partnerships might look like, what role "intermediary organisations" (Mitra, 2009b), including NZCER, might play in supporting these approaches, and how a widespread adoption of youth–adult partnership thinking in schools may contribute to the big-picture goals of reshaping schooling to better fit with ideas about learning and living in the 21st century.

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