Terms and Intentions

Terms

We often use terms such as *'student participation', 'student voice', 'student leadership'* and so on interchangeably. While we can choose words to mean what we want, they also come with a 'baggage' of meanings. And words and terms can be stretched to cover a range of ideas; it was also Lewis Carroll who used the term *'portmanteau'* to mean a word (or term) that fuses two (or more) meanings together.

I started writing this article to sort out my own thinking about how I understood these terms, and also because I saw some confusion in how the terms were being used - ideas were being run together in unhelpful ways. This is not intended as a very formal paper, but rather a reflection on how we use language and what that might mean.

Why is this important?

Our practice is shaped by our understanding of the terms we use. If there are conflicting ideas behind these terms, we may adopt practices that we are not happy with, and which conflict with other value positions we might hold.

Some terms and ideas have substantial histories and current debates; we should understand these, because these too shape what we do. These histories and debates also reflect broader ideas about the purpose of education and of schools.

The first part of this article will look at some of these definitional issues. This will then lead us to examine the **intentions** of work in this broad area, and here the differences will become more pronounced, with particular implications for practice.

Outcome terms & process terms

Terms can be used to define *processes* or possible *outcomes*. For example, the term *'student engagement'* seems to be more an outcome (like *'self-esteem', 'school pride', 'school spirit'* - which are even descriptions of 'symptoms' of outcomes) than a process. *'Student participation'* has

> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all." [1]

come to be used more as a process term than an outcome term. But some terms can be used in both ways.

Here are some commonly used terms:

Student Voice

Ideas about **'student voice'** have been round for decades. In about 1998, I identified levels of 'student voice' as:

- *speaking out;*
- *being heard;*
- *being listened to;*
- *being listened to seriously and with respect;*
- *incorporating student views into action taken by others; and*
- *sharing decision-making, implementing action and reflecting on action, with young people.* [2]

Jean Rudduck *et al* in Cambridge, UK had a major research project about *'pupil voice'* in the early 2000s (which she distinguished from *'student participation'*); the Victorian Department of Education commissioned and published a paper on **Student Voice** in 2007[3]; currently there is the **Student Voice Research and Practice** *facebook* page and the *International Journal of Student Voice*.

While the term can have a literal (and limited) meaning as focusing on the processes by which students express opinions or where teachers seek student feedback and so on, recent discussions have 'stretched' this meaning to include broader participatory aspects eg Michael Fielding's **Six Partnerships** typology (see below) includes the voice of *'students as data sources'* (used by teachers to improve their practices), but locates this only at one end of range of partnerships that also include student

action about curriculum, and joint adult and student *'intergenerational initiatives around a shared democracy'* ie *'shared responsibility for the common good'.*

Similarly, the concept of 'voice' has not been restricted to verbal expression; initially work saw various forms of artistic expression as voice, and Adam Fletcher has challenged us to regard all sorts of **behaviour** as 'voice'. He writes about 'convenient' and 'inconvenient' student voice[4], and asks why we listen to one, but not the other. This then refocuses our attention away from **enabling** student voice (which is there all the time) to how adults and systems **hear and respond** to 'voice'.

Student Agency

The term **'student agency'** is now being used more widely, in order to focus on the **action** that students take, rather than simply on their expression of views. 'Agency' is a sociological term that has been defined as:

> *"The capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative—the opposite of helplessness. Young people with high levels of agency do not respond passively to their circumstances; they tend to seek meaning and act with purpose to achieve the conditions they desire in their own and others' lives"*[5]
> or
> *"Student agency refers to the level of control, autonomy, and power that a student experiences in an educational situation. Student agency can be manifested in the choice of learning environment, subject matter, approach, and/or pace."*[6]

As such, it is closer to being an 'outcome' term, rather than a 'process' term – it is a quality to be achieved by students, rather than an approach.

However, ideas of agency are important as they extend us beyond the literal meaning of 'voice' (with its tendency to define students as powerless about action) to emphasise the action that students can take, either individually or collectively.

Student Participation

'Participation' has a strong conceptual history in areas of development, youth affairs, health and education. Hart's **'ladder of youth participation'** in the early 1990s[7] presented distinctions between levels of participation, from manipulation and tokenism to shared decision-making. Reddy and Ratna[8] in the early 2000s pointed out that young people **are** participating all the time, and that forms of ladders and other typologies are, in fact, descriptions of adult perceptions, even containment, of that participation. In consequence, Harry Shier[9] specifically addressed ideas about organisational responses to and support for young people's participation.

Within educational contexts, it was necessary to initially draw distinctions between the more limited meanings of *'participation in'* (ie 'turning up'; ie participation rates or 'bums on seats' etc), and *'participation at'* (taking part in activities that others prescribe), and the 'deeper' meaning of *'participation through'* (making decisions about education and life, within schools etc)[10]. The first two were necessary, but much more limited than the intended use of the term 'student participation' – which was already being used by the early 1980s around classroom projects, student organisations and so on, and mainly as a process-oriented term (though it also has some elements of outcome within it). At times, the term has been further qualified as 'active' student participation to mean more than simply being there or doing things.

One definition of 'participation' from the late 1990s, was: *"Participation is a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change."*[11] This definition includes both the process of taking part in decision-making, and also the end of achieving change. Participation also has been used to encompass ideas about both partnerships (ie beyond individual action), and about sharing in decision-making (ie beyond voice or opinion).

Other terms in use:

Student Involvement

Adam Fletcher (USA youth and education sector writer and activist)[12] uses the term **'student involvement'** for the broad area of work. Australian parent organisations resisted the term 'involvement' as implying a role that was limited and defined by others, preferring 'parent participation' over 'parent involvement'.

Fletcher also qualifies the term by referring to *'meaningful student involvement'*, but this raises further questions as to what determines that involvement as 'meaningful' and who makes such a judgement.

Student Representation

The most common traditional forms of student voice, agency or participation have been student councils, in which a few students, who volunteer or are chosen or elected within larger institutions to be **'representatives'**, speak and act on behalf of others. Thus 'representation' focuses on the processes involved in speaking up or acting for others.

There have been discussions around the nature of the representation, the links between representatives and the 'electorate', the gains (learning) achieved by representatives, and the conditions (time, support etc) under which representatives work. Such representation happens within schools (usually students appointed by a class or section of the school), but also at an inter-school level, with local, regional, state and national 'representative' bodies.

The nature of this work - whether it is directed towards representatives acting in their own right (ie having power 'delegated' to them) or within a broader participatory agenda (as consultative representatives) – reflects intentions that will be outlined in the second part of this essay. These arguments and tensions are not new; see the paper *'Putting the Participation Back Into Representation'* in early issues of **Connect**.[13]

Student Leadership

A further extension of the idea of representation then focuses on the notion of students as **leaders**. There is a larger debate about the idea of 'leadership'; while ideas about *'we are all leaders'* are put forward (perhaps linking to concepts of agency), 'leadership' remains largely anchored in the idea of the 'few' rather than the 'all'. There are leaders, and there are followers. There have been debates about forms of leadership in schools: 'servant leadership', 'leading from behind', 'distributed leadership' etc. Ideas about student leadership are located in this same landscape. More recently, there have been student seminars such as *'The Leader in Me'* and large-scale events that focus on inspiring students to be leaders.

The distinction between *'student representatives'* and *'student leaders'* appears in very practical terms: some schools have **Student Representative Councils (SRCs)** while others have **Student Leadership Councils (SLCs)**. The names (and distinctions) are not random or accidental; there are (or in some cases were) differences of intention – eg whether the role of the (relatively) few students chosen is primarily to 'represent' other students, or whether their role is to 'lead' them.

Student Empowerment

The term **'empowerment'** has been used both as an outcome and as a process. There is considerable debate about whether, as a process, others or institutions can 'empower' someone, or whether that is something one must do for one's self. Similarly there are debates about whether power is 'zero sum' ie if someone gains power, does someone else have to lose power? It's a tricky area.

Intentions

The terms we use for this work reflect its intentions. Michael Fielding asks:

"What is all this activity for? Whose interests does it serve? Is student voice a neutral technology or an inevitable expression of a set of values and assumptions, not just about teaching and learning, but about the kind of society we wish to live in?" [14]

This question is actually part of a broader but similar discussion about the goals of schooling: *What is the purpose of education? Why does a society put money (from taxes) into schools?*

David Labaree[15] identifies three conflicting goals of an education system (*'democratic equality'*: a focus on preparing citizens; *'social efficiency'*: a focus on training workers; *'social mobility'*: a focus on preparing individuals to compete for social positions), but also draws attention to the ways in which these goals benefit or deliver outcomes for society as a whole (ie a **public good**), or for individuals (ie a **private good**). He argues that these goals compete, but also form temporary alliances, depending on broader economic and social needs. We are currently in a time in which the goal of 'social mobility' dominates, and education is then seen as a commodity that obtains advantage for one's self and family.

Similarly, we can look at the intentions behind the terms we use; are they for **'public good'** or for **'private good'**. This may be about the public good – about 'democratic equality' or about improving outcomes for all in our society; or it may be about private goods, with the primary intention of providing advantages (including skills) for the individuals involved. As distinct from Labaree's analysis, might it be possible for our work to have both forms of benefit?

I argue that, while there will be advantages for individuals (ie private goods – and it is interesting that much of the evaluation work about participation has focused on this: what individuals gain for themselves by being participants[16]), our work must be more centrally about the **public good** of enhancing outcomes for all ie creating educational change and transformation in order to build participation and citizenship for all. Such a focus on partnerships between students and adults in schools then reflects the nature of the society that we want to produce.

So, I think there are three broad **intentions** of our work:

- First, this work intends to **improve the capacity of professionals** to deliver student outcomes, through the 'amplification' of student voices (ie via feedback to teachers, use of students as data sources etc). Students have important knowledge and a 'voice' that is listened to, but decisions remain largely made by others; traditional roles, relationships and purposes in education remain unchanged;

- Secondly, this work intends to **improve the engagement and thus the capacity and outcomes (academic, wellbeing etc) of the individual students who are involved**. Students' agency and decision-making are increased, particularly in areas in which they can be active learners and make decisions about their own learning. Both student and teacher roles are changed, but traditional goals and structures remain unchanged;

- Thirdly, this work intends to **build partnerships between students and others (teachers, administrators, parents etc) to explore, challenge, co-construct**

and transform education – how learning happens, the purposes and outcomes of learning – in ways that benefit all**. Students are active participants, alongside others, and sometimes as representatives, sharing decision-making and implementation to improve everyone's learning and teaching.

In practice, elements of these intentions usually co-exist and comple-ment each other. For example, the expression of student voices can influence teacher practices, but also builds the competence and efficacy of the students themselves, as well as establishing various forms of partnerships that change the educational landscape in ways that benefit all participants – students and teachers. So each of the terms can be used broadly and interchangeably, as well as narrowly and specifically.

The three intentions then have parallels in the terms we most commonly use. While each of the terms we've identified can be 'stretched' to cover all these intentions, they each have slightly different implications within these intentions:

- **'Student voice'** refers most directly to the processes by which students provide feedback and advice to increase the effectiveness of teaching practices;
- **'Student agency'** refers most directly to the actions taken by students to improve their educational outcomes (engagement, learning, wellbeing);
- **'Student participation'** refers most directly to the processes of partnerships in decision-making between students and others that improve outcomes for all.

Each of the terms can also be seen to encompass a continuum of practices – eg from 'minimalist' to 'maximalist', from passive to active, or from teacher-led to student-led.

In this way these three intentions are able to be mapped neatly onto the six 'patterns of partnerships' (*how adults listen to and learn with students in schools*) identified by Michael Fielding:

- **Students as data sources:**
  Staff utilise information about student progress and well-being;

- **Students as active respondents:**
  Staff invite student dialogue and discussion to deepen learning/professional decisions;

- **Students as co-enquirers:**
  Staff take lead role with high-profile active student support;

- **Students as knowledge creators:**
  Students take lead role with active staff support;

- **Students as joint authors:**
  Students and staff decide on a joint course of action together;

- **Intergenerational learning as lived democracy:**
  Shared commitment to/responsibiity for the common good.[17]

While each of the terms can be (and have been) stretched to cover all of this, they have also been used more narrowly in ways that might 'limit' understanding. Hence, to encompass the full range of what we do, and what we intend, it is suggested that we may need to adopt the more extended term of **'student voice, agency and participation'** in order to avoid initiatives being limited, trivialised and misinterpreted.

To concentrate on just one of these terms can lead to misunderstanding and restriction of what we do. To talk only of *'student voice,'* risks limiting this work to processes of students speaking to others/adults (as informants or advisers); to talk only of *'student agency,'* risks trivialising student initiatives to simple and directed actions (SRC fundraising or social events; students doing things at adult direction); to talk only of *'student participation'* risks misinterpreting this as just ways to get students to turn up or be involved in the activities that we/adults run. We must always be alert to these restrictions - and willing to challenge them, asserting the importance and breadth of all students' voice, agency and participation in decision-making.

Roger Holdsworth

1   Carroll, L. (Charles Dodgson) (1872) **Through the Looking-Glass**, chapter 6, p. 205 (edition of 1934)

2   Subsequently published at: Holdsworth, R. (2000) 'Schools that create real roles of value for young people'. *Prospects* 30, 3: 349-362

3   Manefield, J., Collins, R. & Moore, J.; with Mahar, S. & Warne, C. (2007) **Student Voice: A historical perspective and new directions.** Paper #10: Research and Innovation Division, Office of Learning and Teaching, Victorian Department of Education: Melbourne.
    Available at: www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/publ/research/publ/student_voice_report.pdf

4   Fletcher, A. (2013) **Convenient Student Voice or Inconvenient Student Voice?**
    Available at: https://adamfletcher.net/convenient-student-voice-or-inconvenient-student-voice/

5   www.gettingsmart.com/2015/12/201512tips-for-developing-student-agency/

6   https://www.knewton.com/resources/blog/ed-tech-101/student-agency/

7   Hart, R. (1992) **Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship.** Innocenti Essay No 4. UNICEF International Child Development Centre: Florence, Italy

8   Reddy, N. & Ratna, K. (2002) **Journey in Children's Participation**. The Concerned for Working Children: Bangalore, India.
    Available at: www.youthmetro.org/uploads/4/7/6/5/47654969/reddy-ratna-a-journey-in-childrens-participation.pdf

9   Shier, H. (2001) 'Pathways to participation: openings, opportunities and obligations'. *Children & Society* 15, 2: 107–117

10 Holdsworth, R. (ed) **Student Participation and the Participation and Equity Program.** PEP Discussion Paper No 2: Commonwealth Schools Commission: Canberra

11 Tresider, P. (1997) **Empowering Children and Young People,** Children's Rights Office/Save the Children

12 See: https://soundout.org/

13 Holdsworth, R. (1986) 'Putting the Participation Back Into Representation'. *Connect* 37-38, February-April: 3-5; and reprinted in *Connect* 174, December 2008: 12-13. Available at: http://research.acer.edu.au/connect/vol2008/iss174/

14 Fielding, M. (2012) 'Student voice: patterns of partnership and demands of deep democracy'. *Connect* 197: October: 10-15

15 Labaree, D. (1997) 'Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals'. *American Educational Research Journal*, Spring: 34, 1: 39-81. Available at: https://web.stanford.edu/~dlabaree/publications/Public_Goods_Private_Goods.pdf

16 eg see Kirby, P. & Bryson, S. (2002) **Measuring the Magic?: Evaluating and Researching Young People's Participation in Public Decision Making**. Carnegie United Kingdom Trust: London. Available at:
    www.participationworks.org.uk/files/webfm/files/resources/k-items/carnegie/Measure%20the%20Magic/index.pdf

17 Fielding, M. (2012) cited above: *Connect* 197: 12-13

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