

Critical Review

Rethinking The Challenges and Possibilities of Student Voice and Agency

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Abstract: *In the last few decades, attempts at increasing student involvement in various forms and in several countries have challenged the notion that education is something that happens to people. Drawing on sources from the last 15 years or so mainly in the UK, USA and Australia, this critical review explores the theories and practices underpinning student voice research in relation to the principle of increasing students' active participation in decision-making within schools. In this paper, I investigate the rationale, main empirical studies in student voice research as manifested through student consultation, key issues and the potential and limitations of developing and enacting Students as Researchers (SAR) as a more participatory, but no less problematic, manifestation of student voice in schools. This review informed an interventionist study I undertook to explore how participatory initiatives such as SAR in one Lebanese school can provide an important opportunity for schools to consider students' active participation in current school and community life, and the creation of new spaces for shifting teacher-student relationships.*

Contextualisation

My involvement in student voice activities started while I was teaching World History in Beirut, Lebanon from 2002-2006. At one of the schools I worked in, a student writer in the school newspaper cogently addressed the challenges and shortcomings of the Lebanese educational system which he considered to be archaic. The article caused an uproar in the school's administration, and prompted them from then on, to approve selective topics and writers for the student magazine, effectively imposing censorship. This applied "culture of silence" (Freire, 1970, p 14) around issues that the students were keen to discuss in order for them to respond creatively to the challenges in their lives and the world, spurred me (and the particular student) to ask the question, 'What is education for?'. This experience was an invaluable stimulus for thinking about school improvement and the kinds of skills, knowledge and attitudes schools try to foster in students and for what kind of a world. My teaching experiences and prospective research on student voice in Lebanon prompted me to explore in this paper the extent to which school initiatives such as school consultation and SAR can cultivate collaborative relationships among students, and between students and teachers that are conducive to capacity building and agency. In this paper, I investigate the rationale, main empirical studies in student voice research as manifested through student consultation, key issues and the potential and limitations of developing and enacting SAR as a more participatory, but no less problematic, manifestation of student voice in schools.

Student Voice: Rationale

Student voice has emerged as the single term in educational research to encompass a spectrum of initiatives that advocate the redefinition of the role of students in research and educational change. Cook-Sather (2006) describes student voice as having a legitimate perspective, presence and active role. Wolk (1998) argues that everyone has a voice and, therefore, this is not something that can be 'given', and he asks, "What do we do with it? And to what conscious degree have we developed it and continue to develop it?" (p 186). Student voice is located within a complex web of school structures and cultures that are shaped by

policymakers, school leaders, teachers, researchers and students themselves. In its most conservative form, voice means having a say when asked but without any guarantee of a necessary response, whereas in its most radical form it calls for “a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p 363).

Interest in student voice has re-emerged because of a call among progressive educators to review the structures, practices and values that dominate schooling and which contrast sharply with how young people live today, as is discussed below (Rudduck, 2007). Children's right to express their views was also legitimated internationally by the 1989 United Nations (UN) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*; in Britain implementation was slow and, for example, impacted on legislation such as ‘*Every Child Matters*’ (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2003) more than the conduct of schools (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Principles of student voice have been effectively enacted within schools in different ways internationally as, for example, in:

- *Denmark*: The government has emphasised student voice as a vehicle for creating democratic schools (Flutter, 2007);
- *US*: Student voice has been about promoting diversity and breaking down racial and class barriers (Mitra, 2001);
- *New Zealand*: Voice has been one of several strategies used to foster active and widespread student participation within schools and the local community (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2003);
- *Chile*: Secondary students and university researchers co-investigated and designed innovative pedagogies and curriculum materials to develop education in democracy (Fielding and Prieto, 2002).

In thinking about the contributions of student voice, its advocates (Mitra, 2001; Fielding, 2001, 2004, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006; MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck and Myers, 2003; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007) have argued for its contribution to new ways of thinking about improving schools in two main ways. Firstly, it offers teachers important insights into learning, teaching and schooling from the perspective of different students and groups of students as “expert witnesses” (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p 4). Consequently, this work potentially challenges the passive role of students within schools and may redefine student-teacher relationships as a joint endeavour in learning (Fielding, 2007). Secondly, student voice advocates claim that this work enables students to actively shape their education as citizens. Holdsworth (2000), for example, argues that UK and Australian (and, I would add, Lebanese) schools tend to apply minimalist notions of citizenship education which emphasise institutionalised rules about rights and responsibilities for future would-be citizens such as young people, rather than maximalist interpretations that include active, democratic participation as shapers of, and decision-makers within, communities in the present. This view also aims to counter conventional conceptions of young people as vulnerable, incompetent and immature (Grace, 1995), and calls into question the deep school structures that reduce students' status to one of compliant dependence without recognising the extent to which students today already make many important decisions in their lives as a result of our increasingly complex and consumerist culture. Yet at school, they are denied the opportunity to develop responsibility, express their social maturity and shape their learning as social actors in their own right (Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace, 1996; Frost, 2007). Below, I focus on the important contributions of student consultation as a manifestation of student voice and in many ways a precursor to SAR in the UK.

Student Consultation

Empirical studies in student voice research (Mitra, 2001; MacBeath *et al*, 2003; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Morgan, 2006; Pedder and McIntyre 2006; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; Thompson, 2009) have demonstrated the important practical contributions of student consultation for school improvement among those teachers who have seriously considered students' perspectives. Listening and learning from student voices necessitated a shift from the ways in which teachers engaged with students and how they perceived their own practices. Across the aforementioned studies, teachers and students reported that their relationships, communication, and learning had noticeably improved. Students had mostly expressed a stronger commitment to learning and developed a sense of identity as learners (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). The qualitative impact of consultation on students' learning enhanced and improved their motivation, attendance, positive attitudes towards learning, capacity for responsibility and new roles, and perceptions of teachers. Teachers felt that they benefited because they positively changed their perceptions of students' capacities, gained new perspectives on their teaching and enhanced their pedagogies (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Arnot and Reay (2007) caution educators about assuming that power relations between students and teachers can be altered through simply eliciting student 'talk'. Additionally, some critics such as Mannion (2007, p 406) argue that this "enlightenment rationale" - as he calls it - in which students provide teachers with information about conditions and their processes of learning restricts agency solely to adults who are charged with improving their services to young people. For example, other studies (Pedder and McIntyre, 2006; Whitty and Wisby, 2007; Thompson, 2009) revealed that some teachers' initial willingness to consult students did not necessarily translate into responding to students' ideas.

Clearly, this summary provides a mixed picture and it is for this reason that the abovementioned authors caution readers to be critical of student involvement. Ruddock and Fielding (2006) have provided three key elements of authenticity, inclusion and power that support the conceptualisation of student voice and, I would add, participation. In the next section I clarify and build on those three elements which informed my investigation.

Key Issues in Voice

Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the credibility students perceive in teachers' and school leaders' commitment to the processes of student participation (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006). Some student voice research advocates such as Smyth (2006) point to the distressing trend in most Western countries to strengthen accountability schemes, increase standards through testing and "perpetuate 'deficit' and 'blaming' views of students, their families, and neighbourhoods" (p 285) and, I would add, their teachers. Smyth (2006), however, asserts that school reform must be connected to the "aspirations, lives and needs" of young people (p 288).

Within England, legislation (ie, *Education Act 2002*; *Education and Skills Act 2008*) on student voice has compelled schools to elicit students' views in order to help meet outcome targets and fulfil accountability measures, rather than to activate students' sense of democratic agency and enhance their self-perceptions as learners (Fielding, 2001; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Thus students' contributions are in danger of being co-opted towards essentially managerial ends (Roberts and Nash, 2009), with three significant results. Firstly, students might feel that merely eliciting their views and the often inadequate adult follow-up have betrayed their interests and hope for genuine change. Fielding and Prieto (2002) assert that, "It is crucial for students' perceptions and recommendations to be responded to, not

merely treated as minor footnotes in an altered adult text” (p 20). Secondly, like some student voice advocates who have begun to question what authentic student voice means, Thomson and Gunter’s (2006) study revealed students’ “individuated identity” embedded in their responses to resolving issues such as bullying with “what’s in it for us?” (p 852). Such student expressions served as a reminder to researchers that student voice is also shaped by dominant discourses in commercialised youth cultures and school performativity. Student voice advocates, such as Orner (1992), Hargreaves (1994) and Hooks (1994), warn that ‘voice’ must not be reified, unproblematised and unaffected by the context. Thirdly, teachers may view student voice initiatives with anxiety and distrust as another potential source of criticism (MacBeath *et al*, 2003). Although students have predominantly been the “missing voice” in research and discussions on school improvement (Cook-Sather, 2002, p 5), privileging student voice must not come at the expense of teachers’ voices.

Inclusion

Inclusion within schools has come to mean lifting barriers to learning and shifting students’ self-perceptions, teachers’ attitudes and practices, and school structures to benefit the entire diversity of students (Howes, Frankham, Ainscow and Farrell, 2004). At the heart of any debate about voice is power and how it is negotiated through the intersection of positions of class, age, gender and ethnicity. The application of ‘voice’ and its associative term, ‘silence’, to school contexts foregrounds questions about which student voices are “authorised” to speak (Cook-Sather, 2002, p 3), who is excluded, who speaks for whom, and about what. Rudduck and Fielding (2006) assert that student voice in the form of consultation, for example, has often required a certain degree of engagement, confidence and sanctioned language that many students do not feel they have. The implication is that the very process of some student voice initiatives often at times does not question the kinds of communicative codes currently legitimated in the “acoustic of the school” (Bernstein, 2000, p xxi).

Silva (2001) challenges educators to consider whether a school’s “invitation to participate looks unfamiliar, unattractive, or out of reach to many students” (p 98). Pedder (2009) refers to such students as the “unconsulted majority” (p 4); that is, students who choose not to participate in student voice hence, challenging contrary assumptions about the power of silence. The extent of inclusion of student views, what participation looks like and the role adults should play in relation to students remain open largely for adults to decide.

Power

My review has indicated that constructions of power within student voice work have been largely implicit and insufficiently explored. I firstly introduce two important typologies that have influenced student voice work and I extend the discussion of power from Starhawk (1988).

Various typologies (eg, Hart 1992; Fielding, 2004) have been developed and applied in student voice to illustrate the nature of student involvement and influence in decision-making. The authors of these typologies are united in arguing that the highest form of participation occurs when young people and adults work together towards the former’s desired goals. Hart’s (1992) widely cited ‘ladder of youth participation’ describes young people’s involvement that ranges from the non participation on the lower rungs of tokenism and manipulation to the middle participatory rungs of consulted and informed to the highest forms of involvement of young-person-initiated activities and decision-making shared with adults (see Figure 1). Essential in Hart’s (1992) ladder is how youth are positioned in relation to adults so that their evolving capacities are cultivated through collaboration with others. Students who participate as co-researchers, equivalent to rung six, tend to be working on adults’ projects and share in some of the decision-making. In SAR, students design and

direct their projects and may choose to collaborate with adults because they know their project may be strengthened (rung eight).

The Ladder of Participation

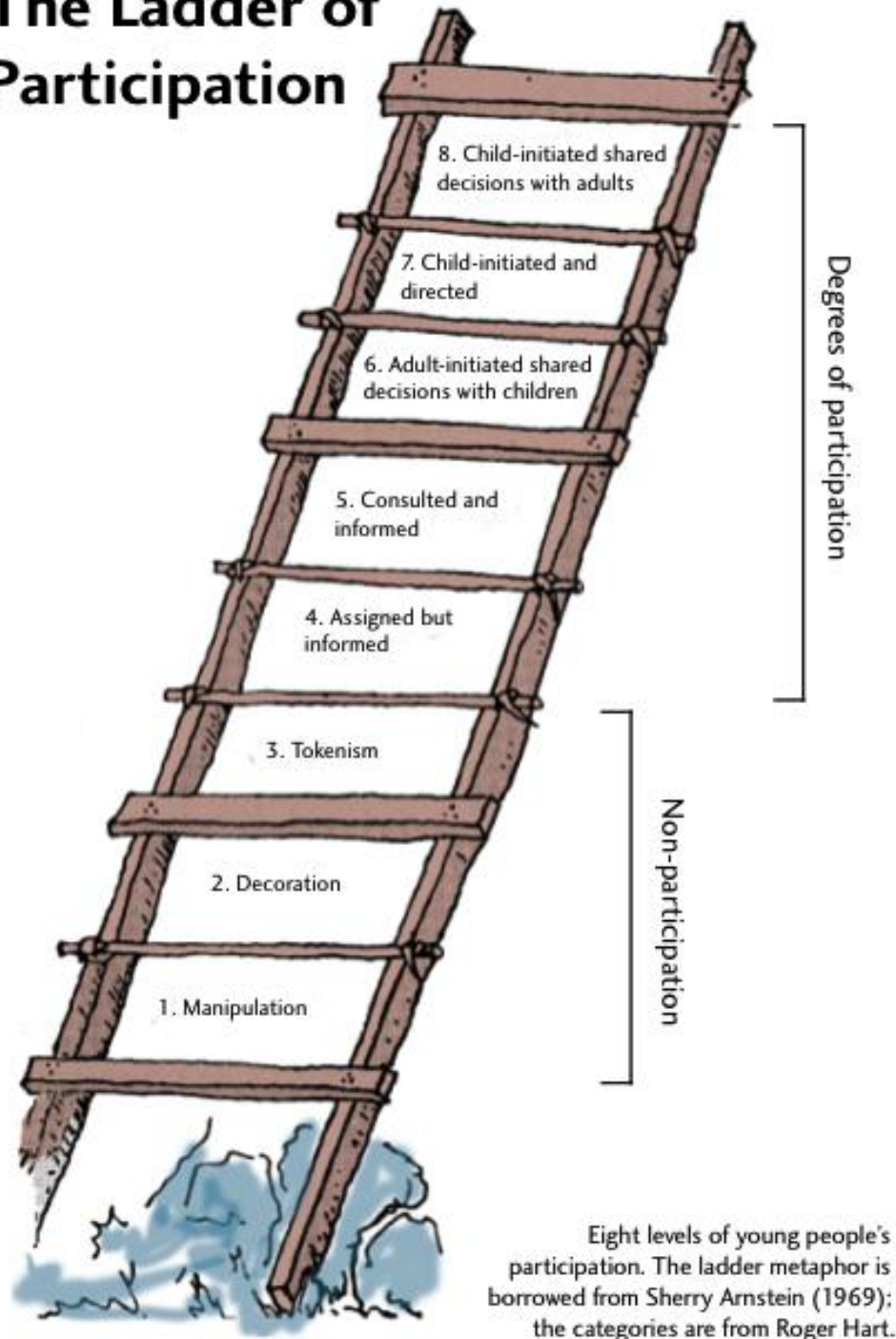


Figure 1. Roger Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation

Similarly, Fielding's (2001) typology identifies a spectrum of student involvement through research activity where they participate as data sources, active respondents, co-researchers and researchers. However, both typologies inadequately show the link between how one moves from traditional hierarchical relationships to more collaborative ones and the nature of

adult-child roles. My revisiting of power theorists, such as Foucault (1980), enabled me to consider power as neither an entity to be possessed or given away, nor as inherently negative and solely vertical. Instead Foucault (1980) conceives of power as relational, situated, circulated, endlessly negotiated and constructed. Researchers such as de los Reyes and Gozemba (2002), who counter the myth of students' powerlessness, assert that it is the lack of opportunity to experience their own power that prevents them from regaining their place as active social actors in their schools and wider communities.

In order to better understand how power relations could inform school processes and operate in the wider society, I turned to the educational and peace activist, Starhawk (1988, p 10), who distinguishes between three types of power: 'power over', which refers to a hierarchical relation of domination and control; 'power-from-within', which pertains to our sense of personal ability and deep connectedness with other human beings and the environment; and 'power with', which suggests influence in a group of equals. The power to influence rests on having the skills and knowledge to cultivate the 'power-from-within' students and teachers, and engage in 'power with' through dialogue and alliances among students, and between students and teachers (de los Reyes and Gozemba, 2002). Central to this joint endeavour are teachers who clearly have a role to play in not just hearing students, but also engaging with them (Lodge, 2005).

What is crucial are the conditions that allow the kinds of relationship to develop that support students in cultivating their 'power-from-within' so that they can exercise their 'power with'. Developing SAR has demonstrated considerable potential to increase students' active involvement in schools and wider communities (Hart, 1992; Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Kellett, 2010). In the next section, I explore how different SAR efforts have sought to enact voice and agency.

Engaging Students in Research

The idea of students researching their own education, school or community and developing their own questions as a precursor to action is recent and still rare. Questions such as, 'Who conducts research on whom?', 'For whose benefit?', and 'For what kind of knowledge?', are at the heart of examining whose voice matters. The emergence of SAR reflects two things: a shift towards school-based research in collaboration with external researchers (Jackson and Street, 2005), and the fact that previous student voice initiatives had not gone far enough in cultivating agency in students (Frost, 2007). As the "missing voice" in educational reform (Cook-Sather, 2002, p 5), a review of the disparate SAR literature (Bragg and Fielding, 2005; Thomson and Gunter, 2006; Bland and Atweh, 2007; Frost, 2007; Roberts and Nash, 2009; Rodriguez and Brown, 2009; Kellett, 2010) revealed common aims to:

1. Address issues that matter to students;
2. Create new knowledge about education for critical evaluation and action;
3. Set an agenda for students to make a difference;
4. Enable students to develop a kind of professionalism whereby student voices can be taken seriously by adults;
5. Enhance the conditions and processes of learning and teaching.

I draw on academics whose studies of SAR and co-researchers have been widely cited as important contributions to the field and illustrate the various conceptualisations, foci, possibilities and challenges of SAR in different contexts (the UK, USA and Australia). I firstly explore constructivist approaches to SAR as an intrinsic learning activity which enhances individualised learning as a co-constructive process and sometimes unexpectedly results in action. I then examine a more instrumental view of SAR as a vehicle for school improvement to enable cultural and structural shifts within schools.

Research as a Learning Activity

Studies that engaged with students in research as an intrinsic learning activity include those conducted with primary, middle and secondary school students (SooHoo, 1993; Oldfather, 1995; Kellett, 2004; Frost, 2007). These authors assert that SAR is a way of contributing to the body of research knowledge about children by children and, I would also add, *for* children. These main studies raised questions about how young students learn research skills, how to report findings and who the research is for. SooHoo (1993) and Oldfather (1995) in the US, for example, report on the importance of students researching their own learning to better understand themselves in order to develop their capacities and “intellectual agency” (Oldfather, 1995, p 132). Both studies suggested how the research activity resulted in student action with adults within school (SooHoo, 1993) and beyond school (Oldfather, 1995). One strength of SooHoo’s (1993) study in particular is that student and teacher voices were included; students presented their work to the head and teachers which then stimulated discussion and joint action.

There were, however, two shortcomings in SAR as a learning activity in the work of SooHoo (1993), Oldfather (1995) and Kellett (2004). Firstly, the voluntary research students were a small privileged sub-group that met out of class time, which meant that the vast majority of students were excluded from this learning experience or the presentation of findings. At the same time, these small group projects have been a way to pilot SAR initiatives before considering them on a larger scale, including in the curriculum. Secondly, more explicit attention to the relationship between students’ learning processes and what they are learning needed to be drawn as Morgan, Williamson, Lee and Facer (2007) suggest. I consider the questions of how and what we learn to be inextricably linked to contributing to Alexander’s (2006) call for dialogue within and about education.

By contrast, Frost’s (2007) research with Year 3 students makes an invaluable contribution in addressing some of the methodological weaknesses from the aforementioned studies, such as insufficient time, space, resources and inclusivity of students. Her students developed and raised their own research questions beyond school improvement issues, collected data using a wide variety of research tools to investigate other people’s perspectives (not just children’s) and published their findings. However, all the aforementioned authors were mostly silent about the relationship with, and roles of, teachers in sustaining research activity efforts. On this point, Bragg and Fielding (2005) assert that SAR cannot be sustained and supported without including teachers’ involvement and learning.

Research for School Improvement

The main studies in this section view SAR as an instrument for deliberate action to improve schools and, in some cases, the wider communities.

Bland and Atweh (2007), and Rodriguez and Brown (2009) criticise the exclusion of low-income, alienated and disaffected youth from most student voice research. They used participatory action research (PAR) as a framework to prompt students to investigate their experiences, social conditions and education, to produce new knowledge about issues affecting their lives and to develop their capacities effectively to activate their agency. An important contribution of these studies was that they challenged the assumption that research activity might be too intellectually demanding for underachieving students; however, they did not elaborate on the learning processes and conditions. Rodriguez and Brown (2009) argue that most students are denied the opportunity to develop their intellectual capacities because they do not conform to school cultures and practices. Bernstein (1990) further elucidates this point, in that schools in the US are embedded in a white middle-class discourse which fails to recognise the cultural resources and discourses of children of

working-class and different ethnic backgrounds. In addition, Bland and Atweh (2007) and Nieto (1994) concur that teachers' lowered academic expectations and cultural devaluing of certain groups, such as people of colour, also contribute to students' disengagement.

In both cases, the researchers selected the main topic of investigation and design while allowing student researchers to devise their school projects and activities. Overall the projects were effective because the topics mattered to students who reported feeling they had sufficient autonomy and support. In some cases, however, within participating schools in Bland and Atweh's (2007) research, students criticised the projects on three grounds: the exclusive selection of student researchers, the over-editing of students' work by Atweh's team and, in some schools, the control teachers exerted over the direction of the project. The significance of these student views is that they reveal some of the current difficulties and limitations of SAR: creation of an exclusive elite, the elusive place of student research vis-à-vis academic research and the hierarchical nature of teacher-student relationships. Another important shortcoming in both studies was the absence of implications for learning and teaching in the classroom because students' current teachers were not mentioned. As Fielding (2004) indicates, external partnerships with universities or organisations must not come at the expense of cultivating an internal school commitment.

In one English school, the development of SAR by the deputy head at Sharnbrook Upper School over five years exemplifies the importance of a school's internal commitment and external support through university partnerships (Fielding, 2001; Raymond, 2001). School-selected students and teachers were trained together at the University of Cambridge, thereby creating a sense of partnership between this exclusive group of researchers, teachers and students. The school's commitment to teacher enquiry and student voice as important approaches to school improvement served to create a culture of trust between students and teachers (Fielding, 2001). However, the SAR group took on a representative role among students, which resulted in involving those students who were, for the most part, already academically achieving and motivated. A major pattern of weakness in SAR studies (eg, Fielding, 2001; Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Roberts and Nash, 2009; Rodriguez and Brown, 2009) is to claim 'empowering' benefits for students without questioning which students are benefitting and what has been done to extend more inclusive learning processes. The personal benefits for participating students have been well documented across the aforementioned SAR literature.

Many students in the studies above describe the rewarding personal experience of SAR that enabled them to acquire research techniques, communication skills, confidence and knowledge applicable to other areas of their education. However, some SAR students in other schools, whose staff were more concerned about students' perceived increasing influence, reported that, because teachers had the final say, they did not have the responsibility to act (Roberts and Nash, 2009). In their study, Roberts and Nash (2009) introduced strategies with partial success to further support students who still "saw themselves as advisors rather than actors" (p 181). This outcome raised for me the question of what it means to act with agency. I turned to Watkins' (2005) conception of human agency as "intentional action, exercising choice, making a difference and monitoring effects" (p 47). I consider it essential that all young people develop the capacity to enact their social agency, which Holdsworth (2000) refers to as young people's active participation as shapers within schools and communities. However, I believe a shared engagement between students and adults in schools can enable both to cultivate agential capacities. Starhawk's (1988) typology of power can help illuminate the central role educators play in creating conditions in which students can name and challenge power-over, nurture their power-within, model power-with and unveil opportunities for agency (de los Reyes and Gozemba, 2002). My review indicates that investigating contexts and relationships that enable social agency further through SAR would be invaluable.

Conclusion

The idea of SAR goes beyond students merely responding to teachers' concerns and has laid the groundwork for future more co-directed adult-youth agential engagement in schools. My review indicated that to some extent SAR challenged the predominant aspects of school culture, such as identities and relationships that can be formed among students and teachers. One important challenge is how to cultivate collaborative relationships between teachers and students in an educational structure that does not practice the value of dialogue and in a context driven by testing. Fullan (2002) contends that at the heart of improving schools lies improving relationships in schools. School cultural change, which he argues must precede organisational change, is where students and teachers can be supported in developing their capacities and in extending their perceptions of learning and teaching, so that they can mutually engage in learning that matters to them.

SAR is not without its complexities and limitations. The essential features that determined SAR's effectiveness and sustainability across the SAR literature were: inclusive processes, student ownership, university researcher partnerships, teacher and school support. In light of the conceptual and empirical strengths and weaknesses I delineated, this review enabled me to undertake an interventionist study in one Lebanese school in which I co-developed with the headteacher a SAR activity for grade 7 and 8 students as a whole class approach. I sought to examine the extent to which an intervention such as SAR could engage student voices and cultivate agency in this school community. The collaboration between the headteacher and myself, and the essential support of teachers enabled students to expand their active participation in school on issues that mattered to them, casting teachers as co-learners, which resulted in facilitating student-teacher "border crossings" (Giroux, 1992, p 54).

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