

The absence of the working class student voice

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Widening Participation

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As equals.....

Michael Fielding (2004a) wrote that *‘there are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners’*.

So, even though Taylor *et al* (2009) underline how *‘the dominant understandings of student voice have been located within a democratic and participatory framework’* and that the dominant strand of student voice work has a *‘strong commitment to ideas of empowerment, liberation and collaboration’*

For Fielding (2004b), student voice projects *‘however committed they may be, will not of themselves achieve their aspirations unless a series of conditions are met that provide the organisational structures and cultures to make their desired intentions a living reality’*.

Fielding, M. (2004a). Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295–311.

Fielding, M. (2004b). “New wave” student voice and the renewal of civic society. *London Review of Education*, 2(3), 197–217.

Taylor, C., & Robinson, C. (2009). Student voice: theorising power and participation. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 17(2), 161–175.

A neutral proposition?

We must be aware that student voice does not stand as a neutral proposition.

Without democratic and participatory structures and cultures, student voice projects in learning and teaching will not provide democratic and participatory outcomes.

We might reflect on the class based inequalities that are '*baked into*' (Major et al, 2023) our structures, cultures, policy, curriculum and pedagogy.

Which students are readily able to participate and benefit from student voice projects?

Which students are invited to take part? Do we even notice? Is it the *usual suspects*?

Do all students know the rules of the game and therefore why and how it might be advantageous to partake in student voice projects?

Is the working class student voice heard in these spaces?

The extra and co-curricular

Students from dominant classes and cultures know the rules of the game and how to maximise their position in the field of higher education in order to progress their place in the social world.

Taking part in extra and co-curricular opportunities such as student voice is an example of this.

We are also familiar with how extra and co-curricular opportunities such as student voice projects are often out of reach to working class students.

This can be due to other life commitments – commuting in and out of Edinburgh, part time work to support with living costs and caring responsibilities as a few examples.

Are our structures & practice really producing participatory outcomes for all students?

The extra and co-curricular

We will also be aware of how working class students are not a product of the new social world that they now operate in and can experience quite severe ontological fractures (Speirs, 2026).

‘Outsiders on the inside’ as Diane Reay (2015) notes – or *‘strangers in paradise’* (2009).

Taking part beyond the curricular, for example in student voice projects, is incredibly difficult when you are made to feel that you do not belong – the experience of classism.

Are our organisational structures and cultures truly democratic?

Reay, D. (2015). “Outsiders on the inside”: Working-class students at UK universities. In *The working classes and higher education* (pp. 67-86). Routledge.

Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). ‘Strangers in paradise’? Working-class students in elite universities. *Sociology*, 43(6), 1103-1121.

Speirs, N.M (2026). On the transition to undergraduate studies as experienced by working class students. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*. *Forthcoming*.

The hidden curriculum

Is our pedagogical practice and curriculum design & content truly democratic?

Lets look at an example where a particular way of being or class-culture embedded is seen as a beacon of success, know-how and excellence.

We might think of the hidden curriculum (Speirs, 2020) as being the implicit

- ways of thinking about the world
- set of values and understandings
- ideas and perspectives

that are embedded in the objects, practices, transmission and social structures of formal education.

The hidden curriculum – facilitated by teachers in all educational sectors – delivers social class oriented sub-texts and meanings.

The hidden curriculum

This in turn facilitates the construction of knowledge and behaviour.

One way of being, of knowing the world, of thinking is legitimised and others are delegitimised. This process is classed.

Pierre Bourdieu (1992, p127) famously wrote that when a particular way of being *‘encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a “fish in water”: it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted’*

For working class students, they can feel the weight of the water all around them, every minute of every day. The hidden curriculum is a major contributor to this experience.

Going back to Michael Fielding – do we really operate within organisational structures and cultures that generate truly democratic and participatory outcomes?

If not, then student voices project will not work as we want them to.

Epistemic injustice

We must avoid epistemic injustice.

Miranda Fricker (2007) outlines epistemic injustice as the harm or discrimination a person experiences as a knower.

A person can be unfairly discriminated against - in their capacity as a knower based on prejudices about their social class, ethnicity, race or gender for example.

As Byskov (2021) underlines, this form of injustice can *‘structurally affect what is included in a collective pool of knowledge, it leads to an underrepresentation of the experiences of marginalized individuals and groups, in turn affecting their ability to make sense of their experiences’*.

The absence of the working class student voice.

Clarity of perception

For Paulo Freire (1976, p196), *'education is both an expression and an instrument of society'*. Any form of *'radical transformation of the educational system is contingent upon the radical transformation of society'*.

In the absence of the immediacy of such transformation what can we do?

Firstly we might reflect of Freire's words (p197), that we require *'clarity of perception, which is no free gift, but is laboriously acquired through conscious action'*.

With a critical clarity of perception, let us in the tradition of Freirean scholarship, name the world.

In doing so, we critically engaging with reality through dialogue, reflection, and action. We reject the norms that are taken for granted and that generate inequality.

Naming the world

We have named the world, we have named the problem

Student voice does not stand as a neutral proposition

Are our structures & practice really producing participatory outcomes for all students?

Are our organisational structures and cultures truly democratic?

Is our pedagogical practice and curriculum design & content truly democratic?

We must not simply reject epistemic injustice, but act with clarity of perception.

What would happen if.....?

Perhaps we might simply try to answer the question that Michael Fullan (1991, p170) posed;

‘What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?’