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Student voice: bringing about change in primary schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on an exploration of the use of participatory approaches for facilitating change in schools. Lesson observations, field-notes from meetings, and interviews with teachers and children were collected in a study that aimed at exploring how inclusion can be promoted through an engagement with student voice in primary (elementary) schools (5-11-year-olds), in one city in the South of England, U.K. Data analysis highlighted how participatory approaches and methods (student researchers, sticky notes with unfinished sentences, visual methods and observations) allowed students to be actively involved in the research process and led to changes in their schools. We argue that participatory methods can be a powerful means for change, only if they are used in ways that enable sustained dialogues between teachers and students in schools. Of all the methods that we explore, we highlight observation as important in facilitating such efforts.

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Introduction

Student voice has been popular in research and in schools following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, which was ratified by almost every country in the world, including the UK. Student voice is a broad term, that ranges from simple expression of views, verbally or through non-verbal means of communication, to the idea of active participation and having a role in decision-making processes (Cook-Sather, 2006). The study described in this paper was carried out in England, where ideas of student voice flourished in research and in schools during the late 1990s and early 2000s with the leading work of Rudduck et al. (1996) and Fielding (2001). Since then, there has been a growing interest in such ideas in various parts of the world.

Within the English context, student voice was reflected in policy documents (e.g. The Future of Higher Education, 2003; Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice, 2015). The Working Together: Listening to the Voices of Children and Young People (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) document highlighted the importance of considering children's and young people's views and the benefits of doing so for increasing their engagement in learning. This was then followed in 2014 by a statutory guidance document 'Listening To and Involving Children and Young People' (Department for Education, 2014), which stressed two main reasons for involving children and young people in education processes: encouraging them to

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become active participants in a democratic society; and contributing to their achievement and attainment. Finally, in England there is a Children's Commissioner whose role is to promote and protect the rights of children, focusing especially on those who are seen as the most vulnerable, and standing up for their views and interests.

More recently, student voice is explicitly mentioned in the Guidance for Education Inspection Framework (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills [Ofsted], 2023), which describes the four areas that inspectors evaluate when they go into schools: quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development and leadership and management. The inspectors must make judgements by evaluating the extent to which a school is successfully promoting and supporting these areas. Whist student involvement is permeating each of these areas, explicit mention is made under leadership and management where inspectors will evaluate the extent to which leaders "actively seek and listen to the views and experiences of learners, staff and parents, taking prompt but proportionate action to address any concerns, where needed" (Ofsted, 2023). At the same time, every year Ofsted uses online questionnaires to gather a range of views about schools, including those of children and young people. The responses are submitted to Ofsted directly and analysed to be used before the inspections take place.

Official documents such as the above signal the importance assigned to students' voices and how this is communicated to schools. It is, therefore, common to hear the term student voice used in English schools. However, this usually refers to certain forms of student voice such as student councils and asking students to express their views about certain aspects of school processes through completion of questionnaires. Whilst such approaches are valuable, there is still a long way to go for more active student involvement. We argue that in the English context, placing students at the centre of what schools do is commonplace, not least through the pedagogical approaches that are employed by many teachers. However, whether student involvement in schools leads to change deserves further exploration. The study we explore in this paper aimed to put student voice at the centre of schools' work, using participatory research approaches, in order to bring about change in relation to schools' chosen areas of focus.

School change

Change is a concept that has been defined in literature from varying perspectives. For Louis et al. (1999) change encompasses ideas that relate to restructuring, development, improvement, and reformation. Schools are organisations that have been characterised as social phenomena (Collins, 1998) that are constantly faced with both internal and external environmental factors that clamour for change interventions. These interventions as described by Waite (2002, p. 161) go beyond "a rise in school's test scores" but are synonymous to reforms, innovation, planned change, or improvement (Aslan et al., 2008). Hopkins (2005) suggests that change initiatives are aimed at improving learning and teaching in schools, whereas Dawson (2003) draws attention to "new ways of organising and working" (p.11) when organisational change occurs.

Various reasons have been attributed to the high failure rate of change interventions in schools. Predominant amongst these is the human factor and its accompanying resistance (Beycioglu & Yasar, 2021). Fullan (2008, p.1) refers to failure of change initiatives in school systems as "initiativitis" which refers to a cycle that involves one change effort after another without consideration for the interactions of such change with each other, the system, and stakeholders. He also argues that the likelihood of people embracing change is largely dependent on stakeholders' participation in the change process (Fullan, 2001).

Students as agents of school change

Perceptions about the role of students in schools and society have evolved in the last few years. This has gained bearing from the constructivist notion which postulates that students are active

participants in their learning process, deciding what and how they learn (Ngussa & Makewa, 2014). Such participation moves beyond students merely conveying suggestions or their perspectives, to them owning the power to influence change in the school (Mitra, 2018). Taylor and Robinson (2009) further add that "power" is a key role that underpins the concept of student voice, zooming in on two factors "empowerment" and "dialogue" as enablers. Fletcher (2005) stresses the need to endorse and authorise students to express their own views, ideas, knowledge, and experiences, thereby giving them the opportunity to be significantly involved as change agents.

In Oerlemans's (2007) research which focused on exploring students' perceptions of educational change, it was highlighted that students knew about happenings regarding change in the school and desired to be viewed as stakeholders involved in the school's policy formulation. However, the author points to the fact that many professionals view students as lacking the ability to contribute meaningfully to education change. She goes on to argue that educational change is largely about "redefining roles which involves shifts in power and responsibilities between the different actors" (p.19). Therefore, students as agents of school change implies having the convictions that students have their distinct views about learning, teaching, and schooling. As such, their views should not only be heard but acted upon to create opportunities for them to deliberately shape their education (Cook-Sather, 2006). Research that has involved students as active participants in schools has the potential of allowing students to have a say in their own education, as well as achieving change. At the same time, the methodological approaches involved in research that involve students are significant in terms of either enabling students' active participation or treating them only as data-sources (Fielding, 2001).

Methodology: participatory research approach

Montreuil et al. (2021) highlight that participatory research has been used as an "umbrella term" which includes research where children are being involved in collecting data or are being engaged in actively making decisions in the research process, or in both ways. Elucidating the close link between participatory research and student voice, Levy and Thompson (2015) note that there may be many interpretations of this approach, but it primarily involves "listening to children and hearing their voices" (p. 139). Participatory approaches necessitate a shift in the way children are viewed, from being passive objects of research to being active agents who can make meaningful contributions to the research process, thereby anchoring the outcomes of the research in alignment with children's perspectives (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). There is a range of participatory methods that have been used in research such as visual images and drama techniques. In addition, there is the overall approach of students becoming researchers (Fielding, 2001). In this paper, we focus on the overall approach of students becoming researchers and within that approach we explore three different methods that were employed by student researchers in our study: visual methods, sticky notes and unfinished sentences, and participant observations.

Developing student researchers

The approach of developing student researchers falls under the umbrella term student voice. As suggested in Fielding's four-fold typology (2001) students becoming researchers is the highest level of student involvement. This involves students collecting and analysing data, and sometimes even setting research-agendas themselves. However, the most common aspect when students take the role of researchers is that of collecting data. Various methods of data collection can be used and here we explore three.

Visual methods

Bakhtiar et al. (2023) through a systematic review of peer-reviewed studies between 2010 to 2021, involving children below 15 years of age who participated in at least one aspect of the research process, highlighted that visual methods are the most popular participatory methods that were chosen by researchers with and by children. Thomson (2008) categorises two ways in which visual methods are used: when visual images are taken (by the researcher or the other adults involved) and there is a discussion about the interpretations made by the participants; and, when visuals are produced as part the research process by the participants. Using visual methods helps in addressing potential barriers related to language and communication, in contextualising what is being communicated and minimising the scope for misunderstandings. They also serve as stimuli for invoking dialogue related to one's past experience and foster diverse interpretations and views (Shaw, 2021). Visual methods considered as "sites of meaning-making" (Rose, 2016) include a whole range of activities such as drawings, photo voice, photo elicitation, cartoons, video diaries, mind maps, posters, map making, graffiti, open to several ways of creative tweaking and combinations with other methods, as per the purpose of the study (Thomson, 2008). These have been used to explore a range of topics in schools such as bullying (e.g. Thomson & Gunter, 2008) or safe spaces (e.g. Zilli et al., 2020).

Sticky notes and unfinished sentences

Sticky notes and unfinished sentences have been used in research with schools (e.g. Messiou et al, 2016). In essence, students are asked to write on a sticky note their ideas in relation to a given focus (e.g. write down what helps you in lessons etc.). Similarly, unfinished sentences can be given to students to complete on sticky notes (e.g. If I were a teacher, in my writing lessons I would …), to indicate their ideas about a given focus. After they write their ideas/complete unfinished sentences on sticky notes, they stick them on a board/piece of paper. Teachers can take these away and analyse them individually or with other colleagues, or, ideally, use them in whole group discussions with small groups of students or whole classes. For example, if these are on display on boards, students can read out other students' ideas and have follow up discussions. Such techniques facilitate exploring students' ideas in more depth and have focused discussions around certain topics.

Observations

There is extensive literature around the importance and use of observations in social research. These have been grouped broadly in two categories: nonparticipant observation and participant observations. When carrying out participant observations the observer attempts to become a member of the group that he/she studies, to enter the lives of others, and describe life "as it happens" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Silverman (2001) notes that participant observation cannot be viewed as just a method, but rather as a basic resource of social research. Whilst there is extensive literature about the role of observation in research, we did not find any studies that explored the role of observation by school students who took the role of researchers.

Challenges when employing participatory approaches with children and young people

Purdy and Spears (2020) argue that co-participatory research with children is "potentially radically democratising, inclusive and empowering while at the same time potentially disruptive, uncomfortable and bumpy" (p. 189). The most prevalent ethical consideration is related to power

dynamics (Montreuil et al., 2021), which entails sharing and sometimes ceding power and control to children. Morrow and Richards (1996) argue that:

> … using methods which are non-invasive, non-confrontational and participatory, and which encourage children to interpret their own data, might be one step forward in diminishing the ethical problems of imbalanced relationships between researcher and researched at the point of data collection and interpretation (p. l00).

However, such diverse participatory methods should not reinforce perceptions that view children as immature or incompetent, or trivialise their opinions, but should be fun, engaging and afforded the same level of seriousness as adult members would (Alderson, 2008; Lundy et al., 2011). Providing safe spaces for expression is another dimension that needs to be considered, especially because co-participatory research involving students is primarily conducted within the school setting, which may be perceived coercive and daunting by children (Lundy et al., 2011). Finally, participatory approaches require flexibility and agility in response, especially because the researcher or the participants may not be able to pre-determine the end outcome, until the process has been completed (O'Brien & Dadswell, 2020).

Owing to the ethical considerations and underlying ambiguity related to co-participatory research involving children, the associated methods need to purposefully foster dialogue, freedom of expression in diverse ways, collaborative processes, multiplicity of voices, shared ownership and iterative design. It has been argued that participatory research methods address power differentials, maximise participation and are oriented towards "researching inclusively" (Nind, 2014). Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) encourage "methodological reflection" (p. 500) and warn about "uncritical ways" (p. 499) which may render participatory methods to not promote children's agency and empowerment, but might in-turn regulate children, which is contradictory to the purpose and aim of co-participatory approaches involving children. These ethical considerations may pose challenges to the traditional ways in which schools operate and how teachers (adults) and students (children) are configured within these traditional contexts.

Procedure

The study involved teams of teachers in schools working collaboratively, to address an area of concern for the school that related to inclusion, through the lens of student voice (Messiou et al., 2024). A group of five primary schools (age range 5-11), all serving deprived areas in a city in the South of England, U.K, were involved in the study. Following a presentation to all primary school headteachers in the city, these five schools expressed an interest to take part in the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. This included teachers, parents and students in all participating classes who received written information sheets from the lead researcher. Further explanations for parents and children were also provided by each school.

The headteachers of each of the five schools were invited to identify three colleagues that would participate at a workshop at the university, who would then carry out the study in their schools. It was up to each school to identify who would take part in the study, but the advice that was offered by the lead researcher was to involve teachers who were interested in such ideas. Headteachers explained to the teachers what the study was about and identified ones that were interested in getting involved and had the flexibility to implement such approaches because of their roles in schools. For example, in one school a deputy head was involved, with less teaching commitments and a particular interest in such approaches. In another school, classroom teachers who thought the approaches would be beneficial for the children in their classes expressed an interest. For more information about the processes involved in the study please see Messiou et al. (2024).

During the workshop, it was suggested to the trios of teachers that they could identify their areas of focus by involving others in their discussions, such as the headteachers, students themselves and other teachers who were possibly going to be involved in the study. In addition, collaborative action research approaches were introduced and a range of participatory student voice activities (e.g., visual images, drama, posters etc.) were explored, alongside ideas of developing student researchers. Following this workshop each school chose which approaches they wanted to use to explore their chosen area.

Teachers in three of the schools introduced student voice activities in whole class lessons whereas two of the schools used the student researchers' approach, where teachers trained students to become researchers. The areas of focus were identified through discussions between the participating teachers and the headteacher of each school. In this paper, we focus only on the two of the five schools. The two schools were the ones that employed the student researchers approach.

Data collected whilst the work was going on in schools involved detailed lesson observations, fieldnotes from meetings between teachers and students, interviews with teachers and students and notes from network meetings. The use of multiple data sources and researchers enhanced the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Flick, 2018; Maxwell, 1992). Audio data and field notes gathered from all schools were transcribed and stored in NVivo 1.6.1. Inductive processes were followed and thematic analysis was carried out following the six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Inductive coding was initially conducted by the third and the fourth authors. Then the whole team discussed the initial codes, reviewed some of them and suggested some additional ones. The third and fourth authors then re-read the data, independently identified additional codes and organised these into categories and themes. Subsequently, the whole team read the code books, refined the themes and achieved a final consensus through ongoing discussion. Conversations and debriefings between university researchers were conducted regularly to discuss the coding process and explore themes, as well as discuss issues emerging in the reflective journals that were kept, helping to identify any researchers' biases (Ortlipp, 2008).

In this paper, and in line with the Special Issue's focus, we explore the approach of students becoming researchers, as it was used by two of the participating schools. In addition, we explore the use of three participatory methods and the ways that they were used in each of the schools: sticky notes and unfinished sentences, photo elicitation and observation. Our key question is:

- How can participatory methods employed by student researchers bring about change in schools?

Contexts

Both schools involved were public primary schools (ages 5-11-year-olds). Hill School (a pseudonym) is located in a disadvantaged area of the city. It has 207 students on roll, which is smaller than the average-sized primary school in England. This school has seven mixed abilities classes from Reception to Year 6 (4- to 11-year-olds). Most students in the school are White British and many of the children had speech and language difficulties. The children who participated in the study were all boys in Year 4 and Year 5 (30 boys) because their teachers were the ones taking part in the study. The three teachers that were involved were one from Year 4, one from Year 5 and a teacher who led the whole process, who was responsible for various intervention activities in the school. The teachers decided to focus on improving boys' writing in these year groups, since this was highlighted as an area for improvement in the last school inspection report of the school. The headteacher also agreed with the teachers' decision. The student researchers were not involved in identifying the area of focus. More specifically, the teachers developed the following questions to be explored:

- What are boys' thoughts about learning and teaching and writing lessons?
- What helps the boys in the writing lessons and what makes it difficult for them?

To explore these questions, four boys, two each from Year 4 and Year 5, were selected by teachers to be student researchers. The selected student researchers, as the teachers explained, were underachieving in writing, were not particularly expressive or confident, with poor attendance and poor engagement in school generally.

Cobbled Street School (a pseudonym) is a public primary and nursery school with 435 students, located in the Old Town of the city. It has 15 classes (3- to 11-year-olds) and serves a diverse student community, including half students who have English as an additional language, as well as some who were refugees or asylum seekers. The teacher who led the process was the Deputy Head of the school, who also had some teaching responsibilities in Year 6. In addition, two Year 4 teachers were involved in the study. The three teachers chose to focus on finding ways to "unlock" learners who were seen as "hard to reach". This group included those who did not actively participate in class, did not share their thoughts with others, did not get involved in activities in school, were not making progress and were unusually quiet. The lead teacher worked with Year 5 and Year 6 students, and she selected six students to be researchers: three girls and three boys. One was a refugee, two were defined as having special educational needs, and three hardly ever spoke. The two Year 4 teachers worked collaboratively and chose six students to be researchers: three girls and three boys (students who were quiet or not making progress). Based on the school's focus, which was identified based on discussions between the three teachers and the headteacher, the following questions were developed:

- How can we support children to be more confident in their learning?
- What are the barriers to learning?

Training student researchers

Both schools trained students to become researchers. During the training at the university, various ideas were explored and materials from previous studies that employed student researchers' approaches were shared with the schools. Then each school could choose approaches that were most relevant in their context. Though each school followed slightly different processes, they both gave emphasis at the start of the training on exploring what carrying out research and being a researcher means.

In Hill School, the four boys chosen to be researchers were trained by the lead teacher. During the training sessions, the four boys were introduced to the research questions and their role as researchers. Two methods were used to gather their thoughts about the chosen focus: sticky notes with unfinished sentences and photo elicitation. Following the training sessions, the student researchers went on to collect the views of the other boys in their classes, using the same methods.

In Cobbled Street school, similarly to Hill School, what being a researcher meant was discussed and the research questions were shared with all students involved. Photo elicitation, sticky notes and unfinished sentences were used as part of the training of the Year 5/6 student researchers and of the Year 4 children. In addition to these, in this school they also introduced observation as a method of data collection. Below we analyse the methods employed by the two schools and discuss the different ways in which they were employed in each school and the implications that these different approaches had on bringing about change in each of the schools.

Methods

Unfinished sentences

In Hill School, during the student researchers' training unfinished sentences relating to writing lessons were presented on a screen (e.g. My favourite type of writing is… In writing,

I wish my teacher would…etc.). Students were then asked to complete these sticky notes individually and stick their ideas on a white board. Detailed group discussion followed and allowed the teacher to realise a few interesting features, such as that boys felt that they spent a lot of time working on the carpet before they are allowed to proceed with their writing. Following this session, the student researchers had to use this activity within a whole group session with the other boys in their classes, collecting and analysing those boys' views as well.

In Cobbled Street School, the unfinished sentences were completed by all Year 4 student researchers on four big pieces of paper (one for each sentence). One Year 4 teacher guided this activity by reading and explaining each sentence and encouraging students to discuss and write their own ideas, with the support of the other Year 4 teacher. Given their focus of exploration they used unfinished sentences such as: "I find learning tricky when …" "When learning I wish my teacher would …" "In my learning, I wish we could do more of …" Students had to complete the sentence by writing or drawing on their own sticky notes and then stick them on the big paper. Teachers encouraged children to think further about these statements by asking them follow up questions based on what they wrote. For example:

> Teacher 1: "Mini breaks between writing." *(this was written on the paper)* So what sorts of things would you like to do in those mini breaks?
>
> Boy 2: Have a drink.
>
> Girl 2: Have a little time to study.
>
> Teacher 1: You know what I mean. What sorts of things we could do when we have a brain break, or we could watch mini cooking (laugh)?
>
> Boy 1: Oral play.
>
> Teacher 2: You want to do dramatic in that break?
>
> Boy 1 and Girl 2: Yes.
>
> Teacher 1: Is that a break though?
>
> Boy 1: No.
>
> Teacher 1: We can do something that could be…linked to it.
>
> Teacher 2: If you're doing English and you want to do just a couple of aspects and just take a break…
>
> Girl 1: I can do a maths game.
>
> Teacher 2: Oh, you want to do a maths game.
>
> Teacher 1: So, we could have like a brain break session, where we could have a couple of things maybe on the table in the brain break box and then when we have a brain break or a little relax, you pick something out of the box to do.

The involvement of two teachers and six student researchers contributed to more opportunities for teacher-student interactions and dialogues, as illustrated above.

Photo elicitation

In Hill Street, photo elicitation was used with the student researchers first, who then went on and used those with the rest of the boys in Years 4 and 5. The pictures chosen were all pictures from other schools and were used as a stimulus for discussion. When used with the whole group of boys, the student researchers asked the children to talk first in their small groups before sharing their thoughts with everyone.

In Cobbled Street School, photo elicitation was used to trigger students' thinking and discussion about learning, especially what helps them be confident in learning and what stops them from learning. In Year 5/6 group, nine photos were used (six were identified by Google as "confident classroom" and three were taken by the lead teacher in real classrooms of their own school). Printed photos were shown to students in turns, and student researchers put their names under the two pictures that they believed indicated students' confidence in learning. Two photos were not chosen by anyone. The teacher explored why nobody had chosen those two pictures and students gave reasons such as: "they are not listening" "isn't paying any attention" "they are talking" "someone is looking at the window, someone bends over the desk". Subsequently, each student researcher was given two sticky notes to write down why they had chosen the specific photos. Their ideas were discussed later.

Whilst photo elicitation was used to train student researchers with Year 5 and 6 students, the teachers in Year 4 used it with all the children in their classes, including the student researchers. Children were asked to work in groups of six and each group had a photo to discuss, focusing on whether children on the photo were learning or not, and justify their positions by adding their thoughts in writing next to each picture. Then each group of children had to look at the other pictures and add anything the previous groups had not discussed. At the end, whole class discussion took place:

> Teacher: Having looked at those pictures of different classes there. How could you tell they're not learning?
>
> One boy: In our picture we first got it, the children were listening while they were playing with their hair.
>
> Teacher: What do you think might have made them?
>
> The same boy: Because I think the teacher turned around.
>
> Another boy: Some students give it up *(using his body language to explain),* some of them don't even have a pencil in their hand.
>
> Teacher: And they may be doing this body language. That means, "I can't do it."
>
> One girl: Unless the teacher looked at them, they weren't focused.

It can be argued that photo elicitation, in the ways that it was used in these examples, also involves observation to some extent, through analysing what is observed on the given images. However, participant classroom observation was also used as a method with student researchers in Cobbled Street school which is what we explore next.

Observation

Following the photo elicitation in Cobbled Street school, the student researchers also carried out classroom observations, in other classes than their own. The teachers prepared an observation schedule with open ended questions to help them being focused. The questions were: What is helping children to be more confident in their learning? What is stopping some children from being more confident in their learning? How is every child showing or not showing confidence in their learning? Ethical issues were addressed before going into the classes, asking children not to write any child's names and make sure that they do not interrupt the lesson when they go in the classes. Following the observation of the lesson they discussed their ideas with the lead teacher. One of the aspects that they observed as helpful practice was having worked examples in the class. As they discussed:

> Lead teacher: What do you think helped them in the lessons and the things that you
>
> saw today that helped them just … they sort of got to their seat and kept just got going. What do you think helped them get to that point?

Girl 3: Maybe like examples on the board before you start learning.

Lead teacher: How do you think that might help them? Did you see the example on the board?

Girl 3: Yeah, there was like, you know, one of those boards you can like, not like a whiteboard, but like a …

University researcher: Flip chart?

Girl 3: Yeah. One of those there was, like, an example on the board.

Lead teacher: Great. Well, did you notice if the children were using it?

Girl 3: Yeah, they kept on going like this, they were … *(imitates the way students look at the flip chart and then write in their notebooks)*

Lead teacher: So that's good. Then the teacher just shows them an example. The answer is there. So, if you're not confident and maybe you haven't been listening, maybe you've been looking down, there's still something up there that can help.

Here, we can see how the student researchers picked up on details of practice that could potentially help children's learning.

Findings

Our analysis suggests that through the introduction of the student researchers' approach, changes at the school level emerged. Specifically, changes in schools were identified at two levels: changes in teachers' practices and thinking and changes in students' perceptions about themselves. In addition, we argue that these changes did not occur simply because of the introduction of the specific methods but because of the dialogues that occurred between students and teachers by using these methods. We also explore some of the challenges in introducing participatory approaches.

Teachers' thinking and practices

Participant teachers reflected on what student researchers highlighted and how they then tried to refine their teaching. One Year 4 teacher from Cobbled Street talked about how students' observations about worked examples and having mini breaks influenced her thinking about teaching:

> We spoke to the children, and it just sort of helped us pick out a few things that we thought, oh, that's sort of maybe what we need to focus on are worked examples, because it's not consistent, or we think that maybe, table organisation. And some of them said that, "oh, sometimes I'm doing too much. And I need a break." So having sort of chunked learning where we would do part and we would have a break, and then we would do some do the next part of it, giving them an opportunity to move around the sort of the ideas that came out of that.

The idea of the worked examples was then discussed with all teachers in the school, during a school-based professional development meeting. Since then, it has been used consistently by all teachers, even in the following academic year and having seen the benefit on children's learning, this will be carried on in the future as well, as they have explained in follow up interviews. This is evidence of sustained changes in the school, as a result of student involvement.

Student researchers' perceptions of themselves

During this study, student researchers in Cobbled Street School became more active in both the research activities and their classroom learning based on what teachers and students said, as well

as based on our own observations. All Year 4 student researchers were selected since they were quiet children in their classes. The change in them was impressive. As one Year 4 teacher suggested "One of them spoke more than I've heard all year which was amazing really". This extended beyond the sessions that they took the role of student researchers. For example, during a classroom observation by Year 5/6 researchers of the Year 4 classes, one boy who was also one of the student-researchers for Year 4, was observed working more actively and independently without adult support. He stood up and walked to the walls where the worked examples were and completed his worksheet. His class teachers said, "That was quite a big jump". The lead teacher explained: "He would never have done that before. It could be right in front of his face. But he would sit there and he'll have to wait for a teacher to come over and get him started."

However, not all student researchers have undergone significant changes, and some students may have made slow progress. For example, one boy student researcher in Year 4 barely spoke in activities and did not engage in observed lessons. Even though his participation was reluctant, this changed when they were asked to be involved in training new student researchers for the next academic year. During that training he actively asked questions and took some notes on his worksheet. This change surprised the lead teacher and highlights how such changes take longer to occur. Ideally, schools should offer such opportunities to all students during their school years and support them in taking the leading role of becoming a student researcher. Though this will have implications in terms of planning and organising such approaches over a longer period of time, at the same time it has the potential of sustainable impacts on all students.

Methods facilitating dialogues

Having analysed the use of different methods under the overall approach of student researchers as it was employed in these two schools, our argument is that all three methods could be used for bringing about change in schools, though perhaps the most powerful is the method of observation. Reflecting on the use of pictures and sticky notes in Hill Street School, for example, teachers thought sticky notes allowed them to gain better insights. As they discussed:

> Lead Teacher: Yeah, I don't know about you guys. I thought that the post-it maybe gave us more insights than that. I don't know, do you agree?
>
> Year 4 teacher: Yeah, I thought I felt… I felt we had better participation once they'd had a group discussion and then head back rather than just the hands up.
>
> Year 5 teacher: I also think last time, I think because, I think they were a lot more active last time, where they had the post-it notes, they had the pens, they were getting up, they were talking, they were discussing their idea. I think it was a lot more, it was more like an activity, wasn't it? But today it was kind of like, let's just sit and have a chat.
>
> Year 4 teacher: But I think there's more accountability with the post-it notes. Well that you actually get to produce something and contribute.

It could be argued that even though they put it down to the method for gaining better insights, in fact, it was the way that they approached the introduction of the sticky notes that was most significant, as opposed to the method. So, even though the sticky notes gave each individual student more accountability, as the teachers argued, if the images had been used in the same way, asking students to express individually their thoughts firs, before discussing, these may have offered similar insights.

However, in our view, observation was the method that seemed to be particularly powerful in terms of engaging students, and in introducing specific changes in school practices. As one Year 4 teacher described: "The children led the session, they had clipboards, and we're just going around looking at what the children were doing, looking at the environments they worked in, and how that was best supporting them". Another Year 4 teacher highlighted the importance of

students realising that their voices were valued: "I think it kind of gave them that ownership when we did observation in Year 5. They looked at various things. They felt that anything they talked to us might actually impact changes, which I think is really important". Furthermore, this school's sessions were designed iteratively based on student researchers' findings, as this Year 4 teacher said "It was a joint exploration with the children as well. We learned and understood as we went along and it developed as we went along. It wasn't necessarily what we'd set out to do. But it naturally evolved". The other methods did not seem to allow them to take this leading role.

In addition, interviews carried out at the end of the process with some of the students that took the role of researchers highlighted that observation was the most mentioned activity and the one that they enjoyed most. As they explained:

> G3 (Year 6): I felt like … I thought like undercover.
>
> University researcher: Tell us a bit more?
>
> G3 (Year 6): It felt like … It didn't feel like it had to be sneaky. But it felt like it is … a highly important job. I thought that was a really good idea because not only it helps other children but it helps you as well.
>
> University researcher: In what ways does it help you?
>
> G3 (Year 6): It makes you have more ideas for your class and also more ideas about the class you are studying.

This suggests that not only they thought it was the most enjoyable activity, but one that allowed them to be more reflective about their own learning.

Challenges

Taking the role of student researcher

Both schools chose students to be trained as researchers based on criteria that they determined and were linked to their own areas of explorations. However, not all students were willing to be part of the project. In Cobbled Street school the lead teacher explained:

> And then one of these children, …really difficult to be there. One boy, in the first session, his sort of … his head was hands on. He really didn't want to do it this year … be part of it. So actually if you don't … You're not sure you want to be part of it, I'm not gonna make you. So we didn't continue him either, but the other children, perhaps their confidence levels are different, they all want to continue so then …

Here we can see how ethical issues were addressed sensitively by the teacher, picking up the student body language and not pushing him to take part in the study.

Power issues

In both schools we had examples where adults tended to dominate or led the decisions made. For example, in Hill School, during the sessions that the student researchers were leading, the teachers had to step in at various parts of the session to help them. As they admitted, they are "control freaks". However, behaving in such a way could be seen as part of teachers' efforts to ensure that they got the most out of the session, when they saw student researchers not probing enough when they were collecting the other boys' views, as opposed to wanting to dominate the situation. Interestingly, in the same session, there was one individual student researcher who seemed to navigate the power issues. As the teachers discussed at the end of the session:

> Year 4 teacher: I love that Student researcher (Year 5) who cut across you a couple of times, to ask your child. He was so confident to do that.
>
> Lead Teacher: Yeah that was brilliant. Tell me to shut up. (laughs) Yeah, it's hard because I think it's trusting that they are trained, letting the boys run it, but then it starts to go down a bit, like, remember the first

> one when they were like this is their job. And they'd get stuck on one thing and I was a bit like ohh we're not trying to get the activity particularly, that's not… It's hard to like balance…

The individual student behaving in the way that he did may have been because of his personality. However, at the same time, the teacher allowed him to do this by ensuring that she allowed him to take the lead.

In addition, in Cobbled Street School, when a session where student researchers were going to share their observations with the teachers that had been observed was organised, the lead teacher prepared a summary of their observations to help them with reporting back to the teachers. Though this was done with the best intentions to support the student researchers, it could be seen to some extent as a way of controlling what was said to the teachers and may have limited the student researchers' participation.

Discussion

The variety of activities implemented by the two schools echoes previous typologies of student voice activities. At the surface, the use of photo elicitation, sticky notes and unfinished sentences may appear as falling within Fielding's "student as active respondents" category of involvement because the presumed teacher's engagement with students is "hearing" (Fielding, 2001). However, when the student researchers took leading roles, with teachers' minimal involvement (e.g. as observers or as helpful/friendly interrupter) and had follow up dialogues, there was a clear move from students being mere "active respondents" to being "co-researchers"; or to some extent "researchers" (Fielding, 2001). At the same time, we saw how taking such active roles led to changes in learning and teaching and new ways of organising and working (Dawson, 2003; Hopkins, 2005). In Cobbled Street school, for example, student researchers have been empowered to be change agents (Fletcher, 2005) through the method of observation, which allowed them to lead the process of change to some extent.

The conversations that emerged in these schools that implemented students as researchers activities align with how Lodge (2005) conceptualised "dialogue". For Lodge, "it is more than conversation, it is the building of shared narrative" (p. 134). In the exchange between student researchers and teachers, it can be surmised that students and teachers were trying to confirm the observations they have made through statements such as "What were people's thoughts about?" or "Is that what you heard as well?" At the same time, when students were sharing ideas, they refer to their peer's comments through signals such as "someone shared", "Boy X said", and "people thought". These show that the interlocutors are trying to be "engaged" in the conversation and express observations with "honesty" (Lodge, 2005, p. 134). For example, students were able to express their dislike with bigger groups or taking too long on the carpet in their writing lessons. In response, teachers explained the latter's importance in pupils' understanding of instructions for writing. In providing this opportunity for pupils and teachers, it not only encouraged learners to be "active" in their learning, but also teachers to be "proactive" (Thompson, 2009) with students' suggestions. Thus, the activities implemented can be considered to be a "dialogue" in so far as it was a generative conversation (Anderson, 1999) and that a shared narrative based on learners' suggestions was arrived at (Lodge, 2005). Also, because students were able to voice out what they think were holding them back from their learning (e.g., input on the carpet is too long), teachers were given the opportunity to respond and clarify the rationale for their decisions.

As we highlighted, there were also challenges in this process. As argued earlier, educational change involves redefining roles and shifts in power (Oerlemans, 2007), which is what we saw teachers referring to in Hill School. Teachers demonstrating through their behaviours that they accept students leading such situations, whilst at the same time, offer support to students to gain more power in such situations and feel confident to take leading roles, is complex and largely depends on the individuals involved and the cultures of different schools.

Conclusion

Student researchers and other participatory research approaches have been used extensively in research. Student researchers approaches in particular have been described as a powerful way for improving schools and promoting inclusion (Sandoval & Messiou, 2022). In this paper, we have illustrated how such approaches can be used in schools and some of the challenges involved in such kind of work, especially when involving younger children of primary (elementary) school age. As we saw in our examples, such approaches allowed students to be actively involved in the research process and led to bringing about change in their schools collaboratively with their teachers. In these schools, where the changes were sustained, it was the result of ongoing dialogue between teachers and students, facilitated by the various research methods employed. As Fullan (2001) argues the changes were embraced due to stakeholders' involvement. These changes occurred through dialogues between students and teachers. We argue that the overall approach of student researchers was significant in facilitating these dialogues and that the method of observation was particularly important, allowing for focused dialogue which drew from details that the student researchers noticed in classrooms. The role that different participatory approaches can play within the overall approach of student researchers in research in schools, deserves further exploration in future studies. Such approaches can assist with moving away from tokenistic ways of involving students in research to active involvement that can ultimately lead to sustainable impacts within school contexts.

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