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THEMATIC SECTION

Children's rights at 21: policy, theory, practice

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Children's rights in student voice projects: where does the power lie?

Carol Robinson*

Abstract

This paper aims to develop understandings around the factors which facilitate and those which constrain implementation of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989; UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25) in student voice projects. Article 12 is concerned with children being given the right to express their views freely, and for their views to be given due weight in matters affecting them. The paper considers empirical evidence from student voice projects in two schools in the south of England. Through examining the complex, micro-processes of school practices which came into play during the projects, it is argued that the power imbalance in student–teacher relationships plays a significant role in terms of inhibiting and enabling the implementation of Article 12. The paper draws on the work of Freire, Giroux and Foucault to help develop an understanding of the power differentials within student–teacher relationships.

Keywords: children's rights, student voice, power participation, students as researchers

Introduction

This paper aims to develop understandings around the factors which facilitate and those which constrain implementation of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989; UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25) in student voice projects. Article 12 is concerned with children being given the right to express their views freely, and for their views to be given due weight in matters affecting them. Traditionally, discussions around children's rights stressed children's rights of protection from neglect and abuse and for the provision of goods and services; however, it is now increasingly acknowledged that children also have rights of participation (Anderson, 2001). The paper considers empirical evidence from student voice projects in two schools in the south of England. The schools in which the projects took place both wanted to create a means through which pupils could voice their opinions on school-related issues which pupils considered important. Through examining the complex micro-processes of school practices which came into play during the student voice projects, understandings around the ways in which Article 12 is implemented, and the barriers which constrain its implementation, will be developed.

"Student Voice" is now a common term used throughout schools in the UK. The term broadly refers to listening to the opinions, needs and concerns of the student

*University of Brighton, England, UK. E-mail: Carol.Robinson@brighton.ac.uk

body. The UNCRC was a major factor which contributed to the introduction and positive recognition of student voice work in schools. The UNCRC has been ratified by all countries worldwide, with the exception of America and Somalia. Although America has not formally consented to the proposals in the UNCRC, there has been a recent move within America, as well as in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, towards listening respectfully and purposefully to children and young people in schools (Fielding, 2009). In recent years, in line with the principles relating to the implementation of Article 12, those involved in the pupil voice movement in the UK have argued that there is an urgent need for pupils' insights about their experiences at school to be taken into consideration and for pupils to participate in consultations about issues in schools that matter to them (Rudduck, 2006; Rudduck and Fielding, 2006; Rudduck and Flutter 2000, 2004). This paper draws on data from student voice projects in England and thus particular consideration will be given to recent government legislation which has encouraged schools to develop opportunities for students to be listened to and have a greater say in matters affecting them.

In 2002 the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors compliance with the UNCRC, documented its concern that "in education, school children are not systematically consulted in matters that affect them" and recommended that the UK government should "take further steps to promote, facilitate and monitor systematic, meaningful and effective participants of all groups of children in society, including school, for example, through school councils" (Lundy, 2007, 928). Since this time, there has been an increasing move to ensure that schools listen to the voices of the children and young people with whom they work. In the years following the comments by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, a number of government policies have encouraged the move towards listening to the voices of children and young people in schools, as well as developing opportunities for young people to have a greater say in decisions affecting their lives and experiences more generally. In 2004 the DfES policy "Working Together: Giving Children and Young People a Say" (DfES, 2004a) advocated that children and young people should be listened to on matters affecting their lives. In the same year, the DfES (2004b) policy "Every Child Matters: Change for Children" set out a national framework for local change programmes to build services around the needs of children and young people. Four years later, the DCFS produced a document entitled "Working Together: Listening to the Voices of Children and Young People" (DCFS, 2008) which outlined the importance and significant benefits of taking account of children's and young people's views when working with them.

The policies mentioned above were all brought about as a result of New Labour initiatives. However, more recently in 2010, there was a change of government and there is little indication to date as to whether or not the new Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government will implement further policies encouraging the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them.

Implementing Article 12 of the UNCRC

Within the UNCRC many of the Articles overlap, and together the Articles complement each other to form one Convention. From that point of view, it is difficult to view Article 12 in isolation rather than in relation to the other Articles. However, within the limitations of this paper, the main focus will be on exploring the extent to which Article 12 has been implemented within the context of two school-based student voice projects, both of which set out to listen and act upon the views of young people within the schools.

Article 12 of the UNCRC states:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (Lundy, 2007, p. 927)

Lundy (2007, p. 931) proposed a model for conceptualising Article 12, with the aim of more fully capturing the true extent of the UK's legal obligations to children in terms of educational decision-making. She considers that Article 12 has two key elements: i) the right to express a view; and ii) the right to have the view be given due weight, although she acknowledges that neither are absolute. Drawing on findings from research conducted on behalf of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Lundy goes on to suggest that the successful implementation of Article 12 requires consideration to be given to the implications of the following four separate factors:

- Space – Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice – Children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience – The view must be listened to
- Influence – The view must be acted upon, as appropriate (Lundy, 2007, p. 933).

These four factors identified by Lundy will be referred to when analysing processes and actions which facilitated and inhibited the implementation of Article 12 in the conduct of the two student voice projects. Taking each of the four areas in turn, consideration will be paid to their implications, in terms of what needs to be in place in schools if they are to provide an environment in which the children and young people with whom they work are encouraged to express their views, and for their views to be given due weight and consideration. For a more detailed and thorough insight into

the work of Lundy and her excellent account of the complexities involved in ensuring the successful implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC, one should refer directly to her article (Lundy, 2007).

Firstly, *Space*, Lundy (2007, p. 933) acknowledges that a space in which children and young people are encouraged to express their views, and the creation of an opportunity for involvement, are prerequisites for the meaningful engagement of children and young people. Further, she points out that the space offered for children's participation must be a safe space in which they are free to express their views without fear of rebuke or reprisal, and the space should also be inclusive, allowing for the participation of a diverse range of young people.

The notion of *Voice* is also central to the implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC, however there is a stipulated restriction on this right within Article 12 that it is afforded to a child "*who is capable of forming his or her own views*" (Lundy, 2007, p. 935). This restriction can be misinterpreted as a child's right to express their view being dependent on their age and maturity, or on whether the adult listening to them considers the child to be sufficiently mature. Yet, it must be noted that it is the children's views that are important here, not their "capacity to express a mature view".

The third factor Lundy reflects on when considering the factors needed for the successful implementation of Article 12 is that of *Audience*. Within this concept, Lundy (2007, p. 936) recognises that, as well as having a right to express their views, the UNCRC also gives children the right for their views to be given due weight. Implicit within the notion of "due weight" is the fact that children have a right to have their views listened to, not just heard, by those involved in decision-making processes.

The fourth factor Lundy identified is that of *Influence,* and is concerned with the influence children's views can have on a situation. Lundy acknowledges the complexity of determining what constitutes the "due" in "due weight", especially in view of the fact that this is explicitly linked to the "age and maturity" of the child as there is a danger that adults may decide that children are not sufficiently mature to express a view (Lundy, 2007, p. 938).

Thus, in schools, measures need to be in place to provide a variety of safe spaces and opportunities for children to express their views, to enable all members of the student body to be heard and for students' views to be taken seriously by those in schools with responsibilities for making decisions and affecting changes. Some children may need assistance in order to do this and it may not necessarily be through verbal means alone.

In an earlier paper, Robinson & Taylor (2007) argued that four core values are ingrained in student voice work: a conception of communication as dialogue; the requirements for participation and democratic inclusivity; the recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic; and the possibility for change and transformation. There is close resonance between the factors Lundy considers as being key to the implementation of Article 12 and the core values identified by Robinson and

Taylor. Within this paper, particular attention will be given to the recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic as this notion is woven through all four factors identified by Lundy as necessary for the implementation of Article 12, and can account for many of the barriers which constrain its implementation.

Methodology

The student voice projects described in this article both took place in schools within one Local Authority (LA) in the south of England. Embedding student voice work into schools was a priority of the LA concerned and it was keen for a university to support them in this endeavour. The overall aim of the work was, according to the LA, "to put students at the heart of decisions which affect their lives". A team from the university worked with primary, secondary and special schools within the LA to help schools develop school councils; they facilitated workshops for teachers to help them develop listening skills, and they supported staff in developing and facilitating students to develop and conduct student-led research projects within their schools.

This paper focuses on one aspect of the university's work; that of supporting the student-led research projects. Throughout the paper, attention will be paid to two of these projects, one of which took place in a primary school, and the other in a secondary school. The aim of both projects was to empower students to identify and explore an area of their school experience which they would like to improve. The author, along with another member of the university team, met with the student researchers and their supporting teachers approximately once every two months for a period of two terms; within each school, the student researchers also met regularly as a group on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Our remit was to encourage the staff in the schools to allow students to make decisions about the conduct of their research projects, to provide training for students in various data collection methods, and to support students if they had queries about the conduct of their project. After working with the student researchers and facilitating staff for two terms, the author reflected on the running of the student researchers project and questioned the degree to which the spirit of Article 12 of the UNCRC had genuinely been integrated into the student-led research projects. The author engaged in detailed three-way discussions about these reflections with the student researchers and their teachers to try to gain a deeper insight into the factors which had served to constrain implementation of Article 12. Throughout the discussions, the students and their teachers also reflected on their experiences and on the processes involved. It is the outcome of these discussions and reflections which form the basis of this paper. One of the key factors which emerged from the discussions was that the hierarchical power relations between the staff and students served as a barrier to implementing Article 12 in its fullest sense.

In order to set a context for these reflections, the student-led research projects which took place in the schools are outlined below. The emphasis in the descriptions of these projects is on the processes involved in the running of the projects, rather

than on the actual content of the questionnaires and interview schedules since examining and reflecting on these processes yields a more detailed insight into the extent to which Article 12 was implemented during the projects.

The Student Researchers' projects
Student-led research within the primary school

The school is situated in an urban area, it caters for pupils in the 4–11 age range and has 380 pupils on roll. The student researchers were selected from a Year 6 class (10–11 year olds). Originally, the class teachers asked for volunteers to be student researchers, however, as more students volunteered than the number of student researchers required, the final choice of researchers was made by the class teacher. She chose six students who she considered would work well together, would listen to the opinions of others and would be most likely to commit themselves for the duration of the project, which was expected to be four months.

The university facilitators attended the first student researchers' meeting. The researchers were taken out of lessons for a morning and asked to decide upon an area of their school's lives they would like to change in order to improve their experiences at school. The researchers listed 14 different areas of their school life which they would like to change, including areas relating to the environment, such as the classroom displays; aspects of their social time at school, such as organising how areas of the playground are used; and aspects of teaching and learning, such as wanting certain subjects to be taught in more interesting or "fun" ways. When writing this initial list, no adult participated in the student discussions, although their class teacher and the university facilitators were present in the room. When choosing the specific area on which to focus their research, the class teacher intervened to facilitate the discussion. She had been advised by the university team that her role was to allow the students to articulate their views, to keep the discussion focused and to encourage the participation of all students in the group. The student researchers engaged in a detailed and lengthy discussion of the possibility of conducting research into how to change the teaching of Literacy with a view to "making the lessons more interesting and more fun". However, the class teacher discouraged this discussion and instead she suggested that, rather than focusing on the teaching of Literacy, the students should focus their research on how different areas of the playground are organised. The research group passively went along with the teacher's suggestion and planned a research project around how different areas of the playground could be organised. The student researchers devised a questionnaire; the class teacher helped with this largely by assisting with the wording of questions, rather than with the ideas for questions. The questionnaire was administered to classes in Years 3 (7- to 8-year-olds), 4 (8- to 9-year-olds), 5 (9- to 10-year-olds) and 6 (10- to 11-year-olds), and the responses were analysed to determine the views of students in each of these year groups. When administering the questionnaire, the student researchers visited each class, described

the focus of their research and asked students to complete the questionnaire. The younger year groups (pupils aged 4–6) were excluded from the research as the student researchers, in discussion with their class teacher, decided they were too young to be involved in the research as they were unlikely to be aware of their preferences. The student researchers analysed the results together with the class teacher. Their findings indicated that, overall, the students would like the playing of football to be allowed only on some days in order to allow more space in the playground for other activities. The school implemented this change for a trial period of six weeks; the student researchers and the class teacher then planned to re-assess the situation to determine whether or not this was to become a more permanent arrangement.

The secondary school

The school is situated in an urban area, it caters for students in the 11-16 age range, and has approximately 1,200 students on roll. During a Year 10 (students aged 14–15) assembly, students were invited to volunteer to be student researchers. Fifteen students came forward and these students formed the school's student researchers' group. After three weeks, five of the students lost interest in the research and decided against remaining in the group. The 10 remaining student researchers continued to take the research forward.

The first student researchers' meeting took place during school time and was attended by the student researchers, the teacher facilitator and two university facilitators. Further student researchers' meetings took place weekly, after school, without the university facilitators. During the first meeting, the group was asked to identify an area of their school lives they would like to improve; neither the university facilitators nor the teacher intervened during the students' discussions. The group discussed various possible focus areas including the price of food in the canteen and changes to the school uniform. They finally decided to focus on how to improve the school's system for rewarding positive behaviour, actions and attitudes for students in Years 10 and 11 (14- to 16-year-olds). The student researchers devised and administered a questionnaire to all students in Years 10 and 11 and interviewed approximately 15 students from each of the two year groups. The researchers also wrote a questionnaire for teachers and the facilitating teacher posted this in staff pigeon holes; approximately half of the 80 teachers completed the questionnaire. After analysing the results from the questionnaires and the interviews, the student researchers concluded that both teachers and students considered the existing reward system was unevenly spread, with students of lower academic ability receiving far more rewards than others. In particular, staff and students were concerned that some students received rewards by demonstrating a temporary improvement in behaviour just prior to an assembly where rewards were distributed. As a result of the findings of the student-led research, the school implemented a new system of rewards, as suggested by the student researcher, which were to be distributed for consistent good effort with work and helpful behaviour.

Discussion

Constraining and facilitating factors in implementing Article 12: the impact of power and authority in school settings

When considering the ways in which the implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC was facilitated or constrained in the running of the student researchers' projects, consideration will be given to the four elements identified by Lundy (2007) as necessary for implementing Article 12, namely, space, voice, audience and influence. However, specific reference will also be made to the power imbalance in the student– teacher relationships as it was found that in the development and running of the student researchers' projects such imbalances in power, often enhanced through the existing micro processes of school practices, were considered to play a significant role in terms of inhibiting or enabling the implementation of Article 12. Devine (2002, p. 303) acknowledges that a theory of power is central to any analysis related to children's rights and can be explored through consideration of children's experiences of their relations with adults. Throughout the discussion, theoretical understandings of Freire, Giroux and Foucault will be drawn upon to help develop a deeper insight into the power differentials within the student–teacher relationships.

The process of teachers inviting students to volunteer as members of the student researchers' groups could be seen as creating opportunities, or spaces, for student involvement and, therefore, for facilitating the implementation of Article 12. However, the act of staff inviting students to participate demonstrates the powerful, authoritative role of the teachers compared to that of the students. In a similar vein, Devine (2002, p. 312) commented that school and schooling is experienced as something "done to" the children. The power imbalance in the staff–student relationships was particularly evident within the primary school when the class teacher's choice of student researchers was based on accepting only those she considered possessed the specific, desirable characteristics she wanted the researchers to possess. The process of choosing such individuals and rejecting others resonates with work by McIntyre et al. (2005, p. 155) who questions whether participation in student voice work results in a "dividing practice", where confident, articulate students are divided from those who "don't fit the dominant discourse and academic aspirations of their school". In Foucault's terms, this act of purposefully choosing not to include some students could be seen as a technique for defining boundaries, which he refers to as exclusion (Foucault, 1988).

Within the secondary school, all 15 students who volunteered were welcomed by the facilitating teacher to be student researchers. At first glance, this appears to be an inclusive approach to forming the student researchers' group. However, some students may have felt excluded from participating, for example, those who did not have the confidence to volunteer, or those who may have been deterred from volunteering due to the involvement of other individual students. Five students withdrew from the researcher group; in all cases the reason cited by the students was that they

considered the work to be boring. However, it is not clear whether, and if so why and to what extent, these students felt they did not belong to the group. Nor is it clear whether those students who remained in the group felt under pressure to undertake the research due to the teacher's unstated expectation that the students would complete the research project. Foucault's notion of the role of "normalisation" can help us understand the power present within such situations. He acknowledged that the actions of individuals may occur through them wanting to conform to a norm or "the principle of a rule to be followed" (Foucault, 1977, p. 182), thus some students may have remained in the group as they considered this was the "norm" expected of them.

Having established the student researchers' groups, both schools designated a space in the form of a classroom with which the students were familiar for the student researchers to meet to plan and take their research projects forward. The students willingly accepted these choices made by the staff without question, thus demonstrating the taken-for-granted nature of the hierarchical adult–student relationship. This resonates with findings from a study by Devine (2002) in which she found that within school, children perceived themselves as individuals with a subordinate status to those of teachers, with her study also revealing that, in terms of the exercise of power between adults and children, children are subjected to a rigorous system of control and regulations over which they have little say. She also found (Devine, 2003) that the ownership of the school/classroom space reflected and increased the teachers' power within the school and that children's experiences led them to consider that there was a high level of control over the organisation of their time and space in school. Thornberg (2009) found that school rules and their regulation of everyday social interaction in school can be viewed as a powerful hidden curriculum of values education, and that the hidden curriculum of school rules teaches students to be non-questioning and non-participating. Giroux (1983) also considered the hidden curriculum to be a means through which students are socialised into accepting the authoritative positions of adults in schools compared to students. For Giroux, the hidden curriculum comprises unstated norms, values and beliefs embedded within the school systems and transmitted to students through schools structures and routines and through the social relationships that exist in schools (Giroux, 1983). The unquestioning nature of the students' approach can also be partly explained by Foucault's thinking around the disposal of space in educational institutions (Foucault 1983). He considers the regulations which govern spaces in school and the activities which take place there ensure that only certain types of behaviour are developed within these spaces. This occurs by means of regulated communications, for example in lessons and through coded signs of behaviour, and by means of a series of power processes such as rewards and punishment which occur in such spaces.

When the student researchers met to consider what they would like to change about their school in order to improve their experiences at school, the university facilitators informed the students that this was an opportunity for them to put their

opinions forward and discuss them. On the surface, it appears that ideal scenarios were created in which students could talk openly about their perceptions of their school experiences. However, despite the space allocated for the researcher meetings being considered safe from the point of view of the students feeling comfortable and at ease in the physical space, it was a space in which they were unlikely to feel safe in terms of being able to express their views freely without fear of rebuke or reappraisal. For example, when the primary school students expressed an interest in focusing their research project around the teaching of Literacy they were deterred by their class teacher from focusing on this area and steered, instead, towards focusing on the use of the playground, despite the students' body language and tone of voice demonstrating their relative lack of interest in this area. This process of students accepting what their teacher says as being "the right thing to do" has some resonance with Freire's "banking" concept of education (Freire, 1971). Freire's notion of "banking" refers to situations where the teacher "deposits" information with the students and they receive, memorise and repeat it in an unquestionable way. When working with the student researchers, the teacher was not "depositing" information with the students for them to learn, although she "deposited" or told the students her idea which was very different to that of the students, and the students received and unquestioningly took her suggestion on board. Thornberg (2010) acknowledges that in order to create deliberate democratic meetings with authentic student participation in school settings, the traditional student control discourse has to be replaced with a deliberative democratic discourse. Thus, if students are to have a genuine voice in school regarding the right to participate in decisions affecting them, staff need to learn to put their own views to one side and engage in a more democratic dialogue with them, without attempting to control their voices and actions.

During conversation with some of the primary school student researchers it was apparent that they viewed planning their research project around the use of the playground as a task set by the teacher to be completed, rather than as a research project about which they felt a sense of ownership. Thus, the audience, in this case the class teacher, was prepared to listen to the young people's views only within the limits set by her, and these limits excluded the students' views around the teaching of Literacy. The students' views were not given "due weight and attention" and the unquestionable authority of the teacher, from the students' perspectives, resulted in the class teacher constraining the discussions in which the students were engaged. In such circumstances, the students' sense of importance relating to their involvement in the research project could be attributed to the work they were providing for the teacher, rather than due to their status as children (Devine, 2002). By rendering the students powerless in their ability to focus on their chosen area, the students may have had feelings of oppression (Freire, 1971). Freire (1971) considered that different elements of power are used to steer others to behave and act in a different way, for example, coercion, domination, manipulation, authority and persuasion, all of which result

in the less powerful experiencing feelings of oppression. Through the class teacher using her position of relative authority to overrule the students' views, the teacher's actions could be seen to have encompassed these various power-related elements.

Within the secondary school, the student researchers were given the opportunity to talk freely about ideas for the focus of their research and the audience, in this case the facilitating teacher did not intervene during any of the discussions. The approach taken by the teacher could be seen, in Freire's (1971) terms as moving towards a liberating rather than an oppressing form of education as it was not concerned with the transferral of information. For Freire (1971), a liberating education is one in which the teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches but one who is taught in dialogue with the students. However, we do not know what the facilitating teacher's reaction would have been if the chosen focus area was related to a personal teaching issue, rather than a more generic school-wide issue. The fact that the secondary school student researchers did not consider focusing on any aspects of teaching and learning leads us to question whether this was because these students did not see the need to improve any aspects of this, or whether they perceived teaching as a domain owned only by teachers, and "out of bounds" for students

Students in both schools were given the space and time to express their views and make decisions around how to approach the data collection for their research projects. However, the presence of a staff member who was viewed, in the students' eyes, as an authoritative figure and in a relatively more powerful position than the students themselves, may have constrained the content of the discussions and deterred the students from considering areas they perceived would be viewed unfavourably by the facilitating teacher. Freire's notion of a "culture of silence" (1971) can be used to explain such a situation. He saw a "culture of silence" as being a characteristic of oppressed people and, in such situations, dominated individuals lose the means by which to critically respond to the culture that is forced on them by a dominant culture, and the oppressed are not heard by the dominant members of society. The dominant members are seen as prescribing the words to be spoken by the oppressed, thereby effectively silencing the people. This imposed silence does not signify an absence of response but rather a response which lacks a critical quality. Freire (1971) considers that for pupils to be free of such feelings of subordination and to not feel constrained by the relatively powerful position of the teachers, they need to go through a process of conscientisation. That is, a process by which a learner moves towards a critical consciousness in which they are aware of oppression and the power of others. In such cases, power is not limited to the dominant people as the oppressed have power to react and resist and to question school practices and processes which at one time would have led to feelings of oppression. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) consider that within schools relations of domination and subordinacy are reproduced through various school practices. They state that "power is at the root of all forms of behaviour in which people say no, struggle, resist, use oppositional modes of discourse, and fight

for a different version of the future" (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993, p. 150). Giroux (1977) asserts that schools should be proponents of social change and that teachers should be transformative intellectuals who provide the moral and intellectual leadership necessary for engaging in the struggle for equality and democracy and states that teachers can empower their students through what they teach, how they teach and through the formation of school knowledge. This accords with Foucault's thinking that power has a productive and positive function (Foucault, quoted in Giroux, 1997).

The secondary school student researchers adopted an inclusive approach to their data collection, and consulted all students in Years 10 and 11, the two year groups on which the findings would impact. However, when interviewing students it is possible that the student researchers may have not fully understood the opinions of those they were interviewing. Alcoff (1992) acknowledges that when voicing the opinion of others, through using your own language you may actually express your own values and way you see the world. Within the primary school, a non-inclusive approach to data collection was adopted. The class teacher and the student researchers decided against asking children in Years 1 and 2 (4–6 age range) to complete the questionnaires as they were, in the words of one student researcher, "*too young to know what they think*". This resonates with Purdy's (1992) thinking, who argued that children do not possess the emotional or cognitive capabilities needed to make rational choices. In terms of implementing Article 12, it is the children's views that are important, not their capacity to express a mature view" (Lundy, 2007, 935); however, no consideration was given to listening to the views of the younger students in a meaningful and age-appropriate way. Such purposeful silencing of a selected group of pupils goes beyond Freire's (1971) notion of a "culture of silence" as the dominated individuals were not given any opportunity to respond, rather they were oppressed by being denied the opportunity to participate and such practices are not consistent with the spirit of Article 12 of the UNCRC.

Findings from both student researchers' projects resulted in changes being made within the respective schools, thus demonstrating that the students' views had been influential in bringing about some transformations within their schools. In the secondary school, significant changes were made to the rewards system reflecting the most popular views of staff and students, thus implying that students' views had been given "due weight". However, it is unknown whether the students' suggestions for changes were made in line with what they knew the audience, the teacher facilitator and other adults in positions of power in the school, would approve of. In the primary school, although the findings from the student researchers' project influenced decisions about how the playground should be used in the future, it was stressed to the students that these changes were temporary, thus implying that adults in the school may overrule the recommendations, or part of the recommendations, suggested by the research group.

Conclusion

This paper has begun to critically explore the extent to which schools, through their micro-processes and through the conscious and subconscious actions of staff, facilitate and constrain the implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC. While both schools on which this paper focuses aimed to genuinely listen to, and act upon, the voices and opinions of students and, implicit within this aim, to implement Article 12 of the UNCRC, the extent to which this has been achieved is questionable. Aspects of the schools' hidden curriculum transfer implicit moral messages and expectations to pupils, which in turn influence the way pupils think and act within the school to an extent where such influences may inhibit pupils thinking as independent individuals. If Article 12 of the UNCRC is to be fully implemented, there must not be situations where the schools' hidden curriculum favours those with a language and culture similar to those of the adults within the school, and all students must feel able to voice their opinions without fear of reprisal or rebuke. Covell et al. (2010) commented that educational practices that are consistent with the UNCRC take seriously the view that children are rights-holders and citizens, and that schools are democratic communities. Thus, if adults in schools are to encourage and facilitate the democratic participation of students in school decision-making, schools will need to develop ways of ensuring the participation of the whole student body, and the power relationships between teachers and students will need to change (Rudduck, 2006). In the process of changing the power balance in the staff–student relationship, the relationships will undergo endless negotiation and re-negotiation. Essentially, student voice work and the power relations that surround and inhabit it are packed with ethical issues and dilemmas. In future discussions, consideration needs to be given to the extent to which Article 12 of the UNCRC is genuinely implemented in schools. Thought needs to be given to the complex elements of power which operate simultaneously at different levels, and often unequally, within school systems and within relationships in schools, and to the ethical implications of the power imbalances in staff–student relationships which constrain the voices of students being listened to in an authentic and age-appropriate way.

Dr Carol Robinson is a Principal Research Fellow at the University of Brighton. Her interest in student voice work developed during her teaching in a range of secondary and special schools. She has led a number of Pupil Voice projects in primary, secondary and special schools, helping staff to develop ways of listening to the voices of young people in their schools. She also led the "Pupils' Voices" strand of the University of Cambridge Primary Review of Education in England and has recently been involved as co-principal investigator of a project evaluating UNICEF UK's school base Rights Respecting Schools Award.

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