

# **Recognising student leadership – Schools and networks as sites of opportunity**

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## **Abstract**

*Against the wider background of increasing interest in pupil voice, this paper focuses on the student involvement activity which has become a significant dimension of the largest of the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) initiatives – the Networked Learning Communities Programme.*

*New ways of conceptualising leadership are discussed in relation to students' roles as active agents in improving learning. A study for NCSL indicated generally low levels of discourse among those in schools around what leadership might be, particularly among students, but indicated a preference for people-based, relational forms. It is argued that a perception of leadership as a relational process of influence rather than of hierarchical power strengthens the possibility of recognising the potential of students as leaders. Schools and networks of schools are suggested as important sites for the enactment of leadership as influence through lateral modalities of power such as negotiation and persuasion which may contest and change existing structures.*

## **1.Introduction**

One of the sites of tension between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' reform initiatives is the role of students in educational reform. Existing research suggest that student voice can serve as a catalyst for change in schools, in relationship to the improvement of teaching, staff-student relationships and teacher-education and lead to moves in assessment, the curriculum and the organisation of the school (Mitra,2005; Lodge,2004; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004;

Macbeath *et al* ,2003, Levin,2000). Identifying and deliberately supporting sites of learning in networks of association may provide different opportunities for locating partnership relationships between adults and young people. It is suggested here that networks (of different kinds) may offer particular sites of opportunity for developing pupil involvement and dialogue with adults, in addition to creating conditions favouring 'going to scale'.

The project described here is the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) Programme which is one of the largest projects of the National College of School Leadership (NCSL), drawing to a close in August 2006. NLCs are clusters of six or more schools who have voluntarily joined together in a four year development and enquiry project to enhance the quality of pupil learning, professional development and school-to-school learning through collaborative enquiry-oriented approaches. In July 2005 there were 135 networks across 90 Local Authorities in England. They comprised 1533 schools with a teacher population of over 235,000 and a pupil population of over 500,000. 70% were primaries, 25% secondaries, 4% special schools and 1% were others – nurseries, middle schools or sixth forms and they are broadly representative of state schools in England. Networks ranged in size from the minimum of six up to 44 schools

The Networked Learning Group (NLG), who supported and developed the NLC programme, has been publicly committed since its inception to the potentially transformative power of the pupil voice in networked learning, school improvement and to the democratic possibilities this engenders.

*'Pupil voice work is about valuing people and valuing the learning that results when we engage the capacities and the multiple voices in our schools. It is essentially both optimistic and aspirational, representing a belief in the contribution that is made when we release the leadership of all those who share responsibility for learning in a school- both adults and pupils.'* (Jackson, 2004a, p.7).

Analysis of the first NLC programme-level enquiry of cohort one networks (set up in 2002) suggested that networks of schools were engaging with different aspects of pupil voice. However, at the time it was unclear whether this was predominantly in individual schools or activity throughout the network.

*'NLCs show a rapidly growing organisational ability to listen to and respond collaboratively to the perspectives of pupils in evaluating and designing their learning. This may create a growing capacity for change through increased organisational knowledge and understanding of what pupils think works and what might work better for them'* (Dudley, Hadfield & Carter, 2003).

Leadership, pupil involvement<sup>1</sup> and collaborative enquiry and have been identified as major themes emerging from the NLCs in relation to key processes and underpinning principles. The inter-relationship of these will begin to be explored in this paper through the research of the NLG and the Pupil involvement Development and Enquiry project set up to develop and research such work in NLCs.

## 2. Student involvement in NLCs

The language that is used to describe pupil involvement in NLCs is of course critical. Student voice covers a range of activities that “*encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action on matters that primarily concern students, but also, by implication, school staff and the communities they serve*” (Fielding & McGregor, 2005). As Roger Holdsworth (2004) points out in one of a variety of typologies (relating to a ‘community participation ladder’) ideas of ‘consultation’ and ‘involvement’ are more limited than those of ‘participation’ and ‘action’. However, in order to move forward the NLG decided to use ‘involvement’ as an umbrella term to include student voice, student leadership etc. for one of the five development and enquiry groups set up to support networks and to build capacity for such work within and between schools<sup>2</sup> which is described in section 5.

In the first cohort of NLCs (n=84) 41 % identified pupil voice as a strong feature of their plans for networked learning and networks subsequently reported a significant amount of ‘pupil involvement’ – for example through

- questionnaires inviting pupil perceptions
- the encouragement of feedback on teaching and learning;
- conferences run by and for young people;
- pupil visits to other schools;
- enquiries in which pupils acted as researchers or co-researchers.

(McGregor, 2005)

Such activities represent different modes of engagement between adults and young people and different opportunities for enacting influence in relation to learning and schooling. For example, all schools produce and use data on attainment and achievement in relation to pupils, and enquiring into and using pupil perceptions is an important step, creating a powerful data source around ‘what works’ to improve teaching and learning and the learner’s experience. A number of NLCs used questionnaires to provide ‘baselines’ of pupil experience across the network. However, as Michael Fielding (2002) highlights it is engaging in dialogue with pupils as *active respondents* (rather than passive data sources) which supports moves towards the joint exploration of the conditions for learning.

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<sup>1</sup> While being sensitive to the importance of naming, discussed briefly in a later section, it is the case that while the term ‘student’ is more common in secondary schools, in primary schools ‘pupil’ or ‘child’ still tends to be used. The paper will follow Jean Rudduck and Julia Flutter (2004) in using both terms when talking about ‘young people’.

NLCs continue to report the creation of a wide range of new and developing roles for students, for example as peer mentors, teachers, researchers and ambassadors both within and between schools and across networks. It is in the joint work, for example with peers, across age-groupings or with adults, that we may begin to see the challenge to the 'dividing practices' that typically maintain the institutional arrangements of schooling which are often unsupportive of student voice and choice. It may be in such spaces that students can enact leadership which goes beyond conventional school leadership roles and represents a genuine shift in power relationships. The next section outlines changing conceptions of leadership, followed by a description of a survey which found generally low levels of discourse and awareness of such 'distributed' leadership possibilities among the body of the staff and students.

### **3. Leadership and learning**

Contemporary developments in pedagogy increasingly link leadership and learning, explicitly in relation to young people as well as adults, through employing powerful cognitive and metacognitive approaches, Assessment for Learning and feedback on the conditions for learning. More importantly, students are coming to be seen in some classrooms and schools as partners in their own learning and actively choosing projects to investigate as Students as Researchers or as co-researchers with teachers (Raymond, 2001,;Fielding & Bragg,2003). These developments articulate with new leadership theory which recognises that effective leadership is dispersed or distributed through organisations rather than residing in an individual.

Traditionally, writing on educational leadership focuses on the school leader as an individual, through the dominant prescriptive models of instructional or transformational leadership. Person-centered dimensions such as building vision or providing support have been firmly associated with the headteacher. In recent years however, there has been increasing attention paid to 'middle leaders', recognising that leadership can operate in other parts of the school as an organisation (Harris & Bennett, 2001). This further points to the possibilities of decoupling leadership from individuals in order to '*relocate it as a function of, and within, organisations*' (Bennett & Anderson 2003,p.3). Paradoxically, some evidence also suggests that '*the robustness and viability of distributed leadership is dependent on the support and direction of the headteacher*' (Murphy, 2005)

The influence of 'leadership' as a term is worth scrutinising here. Gronn (2000,2003) notes that:

*'leadership is one of a family of terms in both academic and common useage which is invoked to designate modes of human conduct and engagement. Historically, other close family members have included power, authority, influence, manipulation, force and persuasion. Within this discursive family, leadership has always been the favourite offspring'.*(Gronn, 2000,p.60)

He goes on to say, however, that leadership is rarely able to stand alone without the support of its sibling, influence.

Much of the curricula and literature in schools fails to identify and deal with issues of power, which has been used as a term of critique in a way that leadership has not. If power is construed as the ability to act (or the right to determine action) to achieve an effect, it can be positive as well as negative and, as suggested by the relational views of power emerging over the last decade, may be seen as 'power to' or 'power with' rather than 'power over'<sup>3</sup> (Gunter, 2005). Leadership and power are not however quite the same thing and reconceptualisations of leadership in education suggest that it can more usefully be seen as influence (Hosking, 1999). Recognising lateral modalities of power, which might be framed as influence, such as persuasion and negotiation (Allen, 1999) may have something to offer when we are looking at the ways in which the different members of a school community can enact leadership beyond traditional roles and structures.

Studies of successful school leadership (Earley *et al.*, 2002) have foregrounded the importance of distributed leadership practice in securing and sustaining school improvement. Successful heads have recognised the limitations of centralised leadership and saw their leadership role as primarily encouraging others to lead through a distributed approach. Silins and Mulford (2000) demonstrated that student outcomes were most likely to improve where leadership sources were distributed throughout the school community as well as being role-based, mediated through organisational learning/collective teacher efficacy. In their large-scale study, the development of such organisational learning was shown to involve a clear sequence of factors dependent on first establishing a trusting and collaborative climate and shared mission within which initiatives and supported risk-taking could take place.

Alma Harris and Linda Lambert argue that if the idea of leadership is explored more as process than person, focusing on relationship rather than role, leadership practices may be seen to be spread throughout the school community as a whole;

*'leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information and assumptions through continuing conversations. It means generating ideas together, to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings. Such is the core of leadership. Leadership is about learning together'* (Harris & Lambert, 2003, p.3).

Such organic activity involves the encouragement and formation of values-driven (rather than simply role-based) relationships and an important voice for both teachers and pupils (Riley & Louis, 2000)

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<sup>3</sup> See McGregor, 2004, Space, power and the classroom

Helen Gunter further insists that we must not lose sight of the distinctive nature of educational leadership.

*'Educational leadership focuses on the education system, is about education, it is integral to learning processes and outcomes and it is educative.... Education leadership is not just the must of delivering efficient and effective organisations, but is also about changing the power structures and cultures that we inherit and that can act as barriers to democratic development'* Gunter (2005,p.6).

While it is obvious that schools are not the only places for learning (students spend 80% of their time 'outside' them during 'compulsory education') the responsibility for student learning is still located firmly in the school and on those within it, generally ignoring wider social inequities that influence educational outcomes. The social practices of learning and teaching are however the core function of schools and Jean Rudduck and Julia Flutter (2004) argue that it is there that power lines are stronger and more entrenched, where there is greater potential for fundamental change to relationships and regimes to improve the possibilities for learning and positive experiences.

The concept of leadership as influence, which is distributed throughout the school and enacted through modalities of power such as persuasion and negotiation, provide a frame for recognising a range of pupil (educational) leadership in schools and networks, for example, through pupils researching the conditions of learning and influencing changes in teaching and learning or through new roles such as Student-voice co-ordinators. However, there is generally little awareness of such possibilities in schools.

#### **4. Perceptions of leadership in schools- *Leading Learners***

In a national study of leadership in English schools (Jones, Huber & Pollard., 2003), 1100 staff and students from 157 schools were surveyed: follow-up interviews and workshops were conducted in 10 schools. The study found generally low levels of awareness and discourse about leadership and ideas on how different members of the school might contribute to effective leadership.

Four schools, which were invited to participate as case study schools because their work on student voice was recognised as progressive, also emerged as having highly dispersed leadership structures. Nevertheless, the students there did not see that what they were doing might be seen as exercising leadership:

*'Students ...expressed revelation on realising that many dimensions of their activities throughout school related to leadership: previously they had viewed their student voice activities as 'involvement'* (Jones et al., 2003, p.117).

The distinctive nature of schools (in comparison to commerce) was highlighted by the widely shared notion of the importance of relationships. When asked '*What is leadership?*' staff and students mostly responded in terms that were 'people-based', social and altruistic – and that mapped onto relational models of leadership. This is congruent with research that shows that it is the consequent changes in *relationships* that pupils consistently cite as most important when consulted about their learning (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004).

The concept of leadership as making positive change happen over time was voiced by teachers in the study discussing school improvement. The questionnaire results showed that staff thought that initiating change *in practice* with others was critical: sharing ideas, interacting with a wide-reaching network and reflecting on your own practice to introduce new ideas into the school were also highlighted as particularly important.

The findings of this report suggest that a significant hindrance to progress in leading learning is adult perceptions of students - as 'kids' who do not and cannot know what is good for them or 'pupils' who are self-controlled but not change-agents in their own right. However, if young people are seen as 'students' who can be trained in the skills to work collaboratively with adults and co-lead learning this opens up possibilities for them to imagine constructive improvements and change in schools and to be actively involved in decisions that may effect that. It is reasonable to suggest that reforming school structures alone will not lead to the improvement of pupil outcomes if it is not linked to profound changes in how educators think about and engage young people.

Traditional approaches to student leadership, e.g. through prefect systems (present in 69% of the schools surveyed), pupil librarians and conventional school councils are shown to involve only small numbers of young people. School councils often adhered to an 'unwritten rule' that teaching and learning could not be discussed (Jones *et al*, 2003). Overall only 6% of the student respondents reported holding such 'formal' leadership positions. Almost all schools had sports teams, but only 14% of student respondents had played a leading role in them and 76% said that they had never had a leading role in extra-curricular activities. Position-based leadership thus involved only a minority of the student body. However, participation rates for in-class leadership activities were much higher. For example 68% of student respondents had led small group work in class. Most students did have opportunities to exercise leadership in school, but such activities were rarely recognised or discussed in such terms (Jones, 2004) .

Other areas of pupil involvement which provide sites of opportunity for students to exhibit dimensions of leadership include peer mentoring, students as teachers and classroom assistants, with Students as Researchers being identified in the study as the clearest example of sustainable and process-based leadership development activity. Where student leadership opportunities had been developed in the case-study schools, activities depended on the advocacy and encouragement of individual teachers

supported by their colleagues. To promote and explore such approaches the NLG set up a development and enquiry project in summer 2003 as described below.

## 5. Pupil Involvement in NLCs Development and Enquiry Project

The aim of this project was to raise awareness of the possibilities of active pupil involvement in NLCs and to enquire into what this might mean in terms of networked activity and learning between schools. Following a launch conference in December 2003, attended by delegates from 12 networks (adults and students) from all over England, NLCs were supported in developing workshops to engage others with their work. These were then presented at a National Conference for Pupil Involvement in London attended by over 300 delegates including 35 NLCs.

In the feedback evaluations of the conference, teachers commented with enthusiasm on the difference of working in this way with young people. The adults felt *they* were more inclined to model learning behaviour and were impressed with the attitudes 'their' and other students exhibited, particularly those who led workshops. Adults talked (in NLG-speak) about the 'high leverage' associated with such activities for networking- where work was engaging directly with pupils and particularly where pupils and adults were working together on something new and consequently exploring something significant in partnership. There were suggestions that such collaborative approaches also tended to be more inclusive in involving support staff, a view corroborated by subsequent research.

NLG research is carried out by a fieldwork team of researchers and facilitators, and a number of programme-wide enquiries have been undertaken, with foci such as the location and facilitation of adult learning and the impact of network activity on pupil outcomes.<sup>4</sup> In addition to an ongoing external evaluation of the programme (Earl & Katz, 2005) annual reviews of the activities and plans of funded networks have contributed to the knowledge base. An important dimension is 'real-time' enquiry which informs programme and system development. To this end funds were devolved to five regional networks which had demonstrated commitment to pupil involvement in various forms. The development activity was determined by a steering group of co-ordinators. The enquiry component, which consisted of evaluations, observations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, was carried out by NLG researchers and three student consultants who worked for the NLG and Bedfordshire School Improvement Partnership (BSIP) during their 'gap year'. The research focused on networked activity between schools and to a lesser extent between networks.

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<sup>4</sup> See networked communities website for these reports ([www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk))



Forms of association, the direction of flow of information and indications of the location of potential dialogue and joint practice development are outlined in figure 1. 'Networked learning' (Jackson, 2004) appears to have been particularly positive in relation to school to school forms rather than individually or network to network. Of the spaces of interaction, intervisitations or Learning Walks with agreed protocols and foci have proved particularly popular ways of schools/staff/students learning from other schools/staff/students. The proximity to the classroom and the immediacy of the experience and feedback may be significant in suggesting changes which can be acted on in different schools within and across a network.

| Direction of flow of activity | Pupil involvement  | Example  |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| One school to one school      | Students present to staff in own school following national conference<br>Cross- school councils<br><br>Video-networking  | South Suffolk NLC<br><br>Warwickshire Inclusion Network  |
| One school to many schools    | Mentoring project to aid transition through middle schools, including production of CD Rom<br><br>Students as teachers & coaches<br><br>Learning skills workshops with KS3 students, then presented at Conferences | Haverhill NLC<br><br>Co-operative Learning NLC<br><br>Consortium for School Improvement                          |
| Many schools to one school    | ICT consultation<br><br>Portal development & online communication by students<br><br>Intervisitation/ Networked Learning Walks   | Bedfordshire School Improvement Partnership/United<br><br>South Dartmoor NLC<br><br>BHEK Leadership for Learning |
| Many schools to many schools  | Networked School Councils/parliaments<br><br>National & regional conferences   | Opportunity Zone, Think First<br><br>Bolton Pastoral NLC<br>North of England                                     |

**Figure 1 Examples of pupil involvement activity in NLCs**

The following section describes some of the activities observed to have had an influence on the adults, young people and (possibly) the schools involved, through students having a greater voice and being listened to in order to explore and improve experiences and the conditions for learning .

## **6. Students voice as a catalyst for change in NLCs**

Pupil voice activities are providing teachers with a better understanding of their pupils, how they are learning and also what is stopping them from learning (Desforges, Worrall & Noden, in press). This activity is predominantly framed as a networked (i.e. school-to-school) activity, with 36% of networks describing this activity at the network-wide level.

Activities are supported by a range of network structures including student collaborative working groups, cross-school placements, cross school events and conferences, leadership courses and opportunities for pupils to give presentations to staff or network councils. Pupils are also being given explicit leadership roles such as pupil voice coordinators, researchers or journalists (McGregor & Tyrer, 2004). More research needs to be done to elicit whether these pupils are representative of the student body or are those whose voices are more easily heard and listened to.

Reports from networks engaged in student voice activity describe their teachers developing a deeper understanding of pupil learning, particularly where students are more active respondents eg. In shared INSET and enquiry. Teachers within NLCs describe themselves as becoming increasingly focused on pupil learning, for example, as cross-school teacher groups meet to focus on specific learning processes such as “thinking skills” or “Assessment for Learning (AfL)”. One network explained:

*“Enquiry Groups have clear focus on pupil learning outcomes and on the gathering of evidence to measure impact. Irrespective of difference in enquiry focus (e.g. Philosophy for Children, AfL etc) outcomes will be the common ground.”*

Such curriculum developments are only likely to have a positive effect when there is a genuine dialogue taking place. Different forms of activity observed in NLCs over the last two years are given below

### ***Conferences & intervisitations***

Following the national conferences, a significant number of NLCs held their own networked pupil voice events, inviting adults and pupils from other networks. In the Bolton Pastoral Network students regularly arrange and participate in large and inclusive conferences which reflect their concerns as part of the BLAST project (Bolton Listens as Students Talk), often with key inputs from local leaders and national speakers. Intervisitations have been arranged between a number of students from all the secondary schools in the area, with protocols designed with the young people.

### ***Network councils***

Pupil leadership has been explicitly enacted in the development of some networks. The plans of the Think First NLC in Sussex to redesign the curriculum have been significantly led by carefully supported pupil activity and agency. Eight children from the school councils in each of the eight primary schools met to discuss what their school council was like, having made videos to share this. They went to the local council chamber and played prioritising

exercise alongside adults to decide what good learning looked like in a Think First school.

At a second meeting, the young people decided that they wanted to focus on learning styles to explore how the school environment is supportive of learning. The school council pupils then became 'VAK<sup>5</sup> detectives' and went on 'learning walks' or intervisitations in each others' schools to observe and feedback according to previously agreed protocols. Pupil leadership was thus enacted, and mediated, through collaborative activities with adults. Network activists believe that the iterative approach to involving young people, support staff and members of the wider community through a collaborative enquiry approach has proved to be a vibrant and motivating process for all concerned.

While structured support from adults, the school and partners such as HEI are crucial to develop skills and support projects through resourcing and advocacy, in developing pupil involvement, voice here can be seen to be coming to the fore as a leadership process, where opportunities for influencing decisions are clearly identified. This is what Noyes (2005,p 513) describes as moving from '*an outside-in to a more inside-out focus*'.

### ***Collaborative enquiry.***

Enquiry is identified as having many benefits for teachers and schools (McGregor, 2004 ; Cordingley *et al*, 2004, Street & Temperley,2005) and individuals and groups in networks are awakening to the benefits of partnerships where students enquire alongside teachers and other adults to mobilise their expert knowledge of the school (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). Evidence from NLCs confirms that working with pupil perspectives is particularly motivating for staff in the process of enquiry (CUREE, 2003) In the year one review 55% of participating networks (n=76) identified research and enquiry with pupils as a significant achievement.

In exploring the significance of dialogic encounters between adults and young people, Fielding (2004) notes the opportunities that collaborative 'dialogic research' provides - through collaborative agenda setting, debate about design and the production and analysis of collective research knowledge, generating a making of meaning which is greater than the sum of its parts. In surveying the benefits and limitations of students as a data source, as active respondents or co-researchers he concludes that either students as co-researchers or Students as Researchers holds the greatest prospect for transforming relations in school. Evidence from the NLC programme thus far suggests that such activity not only liberates the enthusiasm of students and teachers but also that student reactions to changes in their learning have been consistently reported as a powerful influence for change.

### ***Students as Researchers***

Students as Researchers is a particular enquiry approach where adults actively listen to student views and support *student-led* research (Fielding & Bragg, 2003, Naylor & Worrall, 2004, Raymond, 2001). Areas of investigation

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<sup>5</sup> Visual, Auditory and Kinaesthetic

in NLCs are the school environment and organisation, school and curriculum policy and teaching and learning. For example the Consortium for School Improvement NLC had a group researching into 'What makes a good lesson?'. One network commissioned a group of student researchers to investigate school councils across the network and subsequently make recommendations. This might be more properly classified as students as *co-researchers* in Fielding's four-fold typology (Fielding & McGregor, 2005) indicating that while collaborative, the enquiry is effectively teacher-initiated.

### **Leadership pedagogies**

As highlighted by the survey described in section 4, leadership skills are not commonly taught in schools:

*'It's too often thought to be for someone else, it's part of NPQH, it's only about prefects or teachers, Headteachers or entrepreneurs. But leadership is for everyone. It's about helping students to take responsibility for others around them. It's about helping across the network and make subsequent recommendations- this might be more properly termed 'students as co-researchers' as the helping them to motivate themselves to achieve more and see learning as relevant' (Graham Tyrer Previous Co-leader)<sup>6</sup>*

The Warwickshire Inclusion Networked Learning Community (WIN) comprises 15 schools (5 secondary, 8 primary and 2 special) committed to building a sustainable network by developing communications, for example video-conferencing between all schools, particularly for students. The high value placed on student leadership by the network is illustrated by the training given to Students as Researchers at Warwick University, where some students have been enrolled on an accredited course and a visit to their local MP at the House of Commons as part of an initiative to create their own Student Learning Parliament. Understandings of leadership are thus collectively explored and articulated by staff and students and a specific leadership curriculum is in place. The rationale for this is described by one of the programme's designers:

*'Leadership teaching shows students that they can improve the way they learn, improve their self-esteem and feel more in control of the events around them. Student participation in school life is so important if we are serious about inclusion. Imagine classrooms where students say: 'I know why I want to learn, I know how to construct a learning activity and I can help others to lead their own learning more effectively.'*  
(Graham Tyrer)

One in three secondary schools in the LEA have taken the programme up and offered it to their students and 300 students have already graduated with the Diploma. This programme was externally evaluated by Warwick University, which found that students' value added SAT scores in the pilot scheme were higher than the control group and they made significant progress in terms of attitudes to learning. One of the students involved commented:

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<sup>6</sup> See McGregor & Tyrer 2004

*'We researched what the future will be like. One of our leadership activities was to think: 'Is this the future we want?' if it isn't, we have to make another one and we have to lead it, not follow. If we like this vision, we have to be part of it so we can own it and make it ours. Leadership is about this. Being part of things. Not being a spectator, being a player, working with others and not being afraid to take control if it helps others'.*  
(Vanya, aged 15)

This work mirrors the pilot development of the Student Leadership programme which is part of the London Leadership Strategy, NCSL is facilitated the development of training materials co-written by young people to provide six leadership modules. Teachers who have been involved in the process have commented that their own understanding and modelling of leadership behaviours has been enhanced as a result of participation.

*When students see themselves as potential leaders they rethink the concept of involvement in their community. They move from a sense that leadership is for other people to a feeling that schools are places of opportunity. The future is ours to determine. We can either lead or be led. At the very least, we owe it to our students to give them the choice.*  
(McGregor & Tyrer, 2004)

## **7. Discussion**

If students are to be able to exercise greater agency and leadership in and beyond schools then the opportunity to develop the kind of active engagement described in this paper is crucial. In the current excitement and media flurry coming from Government about pupil voice/leadership the caveats of activists in this area must be heeded. Holdsworth advocates that for active citizenship negotiated classroom processes should be around the why of learning as well as the how and what and must not devolve into *'trivial exercises in temporary engagement'* (Holdsworth, 2004, p.7). He warns against tokenism, for example in the issues school councils are allowed to consider and suggests that at times a focus on voice 'being heard' can be a safety valve, reducing the pressure for real change. It is here that worries arise that the citizenship agenda may effectively be co-opted and neutralised by centralised curricula and consultation exercises which involve filling in a form in silence in the exam hall: Likewise that 'personalisation' (of which pupil voice is one gateway) will devolve into an exercise which, despite its aims, perpetuates existing inequalities.

The TLRP/ESRC project Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning (Arnot *et al.*, 2004, Fielding & Bragg, 2003, Macbeath *et al.*, 2002) clearly identifies issues that those involved in this work need to continually address - that of creating new/different student elites, whose voices may be those who find it easiest to speak more coherently and those whom we find it easier to hear. The project clearly identifies further issues that those involved in this work need to continually address - for example that of avoiding creating new/different student elites, comprised of the voices of those who find it easiest to speak coherently and those we find it easier to hear. Post-

structuralist work (.e.g. Cruddas, 2001) particularly highlights the importance of the local, using differentiated notions of identity and highlighting engagement with marginalised underrepresented groups ( Fielding , 2004)

Fielding (Ibid) emphasises the questions that continually need to be asked of pupil voice activities:

- Who is allowed to speak?
- Who gets heard?
- Who is listening?
- What skills are needed?
- How do people regard each other?
- Do some people feel threatened?
- What appropriate systems and structures are needed?
- Where/when are the spaces to make meaning together ?

A further point to add to the fertile debates around the nature and meaning of pupil involvement and leadership in networks is the need to *facilitate* conditions for dialogue between adults and students. It is important to understand and then identify the opportunities for dialogue and the strategies that promote it and follow through the outcomes. Education professionals, as much as students, need space to develop their understandings, learn from others and with training in skills, work towards joint-practice development with colleagues, for example through CPD. It is associations such as these that the NLC programme sought to create through networks<sup>7</sup>.

The transformational potential of partnerships with pupils is considerable but it can fall short of making a difference to and for students because of power issues embedded in the everyday regimes of schools, which have changed less in their deep structures than young people (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). It is necessary to acknowledge and overcome prevalent dividing practices, as embodied in separate classrooms, 'year' groups' and 'setting/streaming' if conditions for greater social justice are to be created (Dixon, 2004). Students substantially agree about significant aspects of teaching and learning but it should be recognised that they, no less than teachers and parents, are subject to hegemonic understandings and practices. For instance, Thomson and Gunter (2005) found near universal approval of setting and testing among their young respondents.

## 6.Conclusion

Adults in NLCs report that active student involvement and participation in networks in a variety of forms is a major source of motivation for staff and students. It can have significant influence on these people's perceptions of each others experience of schooling and consequent understanding and learning. When it is embedded and sustained, such change is quite frequently observed as a shift in classroom climate or school ethos. This is particularly where students have become activists, engaging with community concerns, or where student involvement structures such as school/network councils have

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<sup>7</sup> See Frankham (forthcoming) for an incisive critique of networks in education

been strategically developed along with other innovations such as encouraging speaking and listening skills.

The location, metaphorical and actual, of such student voice activities and recognition of leadership are important, not least in response to the questions in the previous section.. In exploring the question '*What is the best leverage point for student voice advocates to influence the school system*' Mitra (2005) used social movement theory to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of student voice groups 'inside' the school e.g. student forum and 'outside' the school e.g. community-based organisations. She found that a group's positioning (the extent to which a challenger is respected as a valid voice in an organisational field) affected the alliances formed and the sustainability/stability and legitimacy of different types of student voice efforts.

It appeared to be easier to establish legitimacy with an 'insider strategy' reflecting an understanding of the power relations, but this meant that it was necessary to operate largely within current institutional roles allowed for students. Challenger groups located outside the institution had to establish legitimacy through developing trust with 'insider' brokers and while more likely to provoke structural change (through greater freedom of action) had less ability to build alliances and work on the more embedded discourses. However, in being able to mobilise alternative sources of support (e.g. funding) outsider pressure was seen as more sustainable.

In relation to this wider positioning, Jean Rudduck (2004) describes the shifting locations for student voice indicated in section 2 - with the wave of support for student voice moving consultation into arenas outside schools such as Youth parliaments, regional conferences. She suggests that while this may increase the status and profile of young people as active players who can influence their daily lives, deflecting attention away from/taking it away from the teacher/classroom/school may reduce the potential for fundamental change to relationships and regimes *in schools*. This is predicated on the, not unlikely scenario, that despite changes in technology schools as we know them will continue to exist and be (re)built.

Networks of schools provide alternatives to the 'insider/outsider' positioning, both for students and teachers. While there must be advocacy at school and network level there is likely to be access to alternative forms of advice and support. In the case of NLCs this was often financial but also more directly facilitative, as through the development and enquiry project . This supported the development of processes and artefacts from different networks (and schools) that could then be shared and modified in different contexts. The NLC programme also provided legitimacy and ensured a profile in the network and nationally.

In addressing the reasons for engaging in dialogue with students, Noyes suggests that there may be a greater receptivity to pupil voice when '*adults are more willing to critique prescribed policy and dominant..pedagogic practices*' (Noyes, 2005,p.537). This *may* suggest an orientation which means that power relations within and beyond the school are more likely to be

interrogated. Those schools closely engaged in this voluntary NLC programme, with its emphasis on joint practice development, enquiry and distributed leadership might be those where such supported risk-taking is likely to take place.

(word count 6285)

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