Voices We Want to Hear and Voices We Don’t

“STUDENTS,” writes IRA SCHOR (1986), “will resist any process that disempowers them. . . . Familiar school routines produce this alienation: teacher-talk, passive instruction in pre-set materials . . . mechanical drills . . . the denial of subjects important to them, the exclusion of student co-participation in curriculum design and governance, and the outlawing of popular idioms in favor of correct usage” (p. 183). Taken literally, this vision, which is common enough, implies that most students yearn to have a voice in their own schooling, to be free and to construct their own vibrant lives in school.

Teachers certainly encounter such students—those who seek to develop their own authority as intellectuals and who relish negotiation of the school curriculum. For example, Steve, a third grader, reports resisting required reading in his reading group by reading without engagement, without expression—in effect, refusing to make the sense he felt was required of him. His strategy was “just saying the words. . . . Like you say a word, and if you don’t feel like reading, you just say any word.”

By contrast, in his personal reading, when he could choose what to read and how to react to it, he was thoroughly and enthusiastically engaged in reading and keen to talk about what he read (Guice & Johnston, in press). A teacher who wanted to encourage student initiative and voice would quickly find an ally in Steve.

Steve would have flourished in the classroom of first-grade teacher Pat McLure, who exemplifies the ideal of respect for student voice that Schor hints at (Newkirk & McLure, 1992). In class book discussions, McLure asks her first graders simply to “say something about the book” (p. 51). They take this as an open invitation to contribute their voice to a conversation. She then acts as a stenographer, making a record of the group’s discussion. The difficulty of talking and making notes at the same time maintains her listening role. Thus the “somethings” the students say become the stuff of the curriculum.

After observing the students’ discussions moving “unpredictably from topic to topic, leaving the book far behind,” Newkirk asked McLure how she could be so patient and allow such digressions. He notes that she “looked at me quizzically and said, ‘I don’t think of it as patient. I’m interested in what they say.’” (p. 149). She did not concede that their interests were digressions.

Listening is central to McLure’s teaching. “She rarely places herself in the foreground, rarely tells her own stories during share time, and, when she does speak, she tends not to initiate but to react. She is clearly more a listener than a speaker” (Newkirk & McLure, 1992, p. 148). Unlike the charismatic teachers popularized in the media, McLure “is resolutely antcharismatic.” She sees her job as providing

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silences for students to fill, encouraging students to give voice to the connections between books and their own experience rather than judging their experience as insignificant or irrelevant.

But many who enter teaching inspired by Schor’s romantic vision of students get a nasty surprise. It is often unexpectedly hard to teach the way Pat McLure does. One reason for this is that many students think school knowledge should not be personally relevant and that the teachers should tell them exactly what to learn and how to learn it. They resist teachers who encourage them to take responsibility for the curriculum and to use it to frame their places in the world.

Jones (1991), for example, describes lower track, high school girls in New Zealand whose words and actions show they believe their role should be to write down and memorize information dispensed by teachers. When teachers try to relate lessons to student lives or to elicit student opinions or knowledge, these students resist until teachers deliver lists of facts. If a teacher does not make them copy lists of facts, these girls complain that “she didn’t give us any work” (p. 75).

Schoolwork, in their view, requires them to work hard absorbing cut-and-dried knowledge. They thwart teachers who give open-ended assignments to encourage student voice. As one of them said, “We never talk if she, you know, wants us to say things . . . talk about something, you know? Everyone shuts up” (Jones, 1991, p. 80). These students’ voices oppose teachers seeking to foster student voice and initiative—an apparent paradox.

**Conflicting Voices**

Understanding this paradox requires understanding voice in Bakhtin’s sense of “the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness” (1981, p. 434), not simply the physical or audible. It also requires understanding that each student can have many voices, not all of which are in harmony with one another (Bakhtin, 1981). Actions often speak louder than words, and any student might speak with many tongues.

The girls Jones observed, for example, had assertive and lively voices in their personal, non-school lives. But they defined their out-of-school experience as irrelevant to school and defeated teachers’ efforts to elicit their opinions or to relate school to their personal experience. Their personal and school voices do not converse constructively with one another. Indeed, in school, one voice silenced the other.

The paradox of conflicting voices within one person reflects the fact that these voices are not freely chosen, but develop within ongoing social transactions. Children are born into cultural conversations (in the broadest sense) that they neither begin nor choose. For example, boys and girls tend to enter different conversations that predispose them to tell different stories. Ruth Fletcher’s first- and second-grade boys wrote stories such as:

The shark is bombed. He is dying from the bullets and the bullets are murdering him and the shark doesn’t give up. (Willinsky, 1990, p. 128)

The girls, on the other hand, wrote stories such as:

One bright morning a little girl went outside and there was a beautiful garden. It was so beautiful that she ran into the house and told her mother and her mother was so excited, even when she was doing the dishes, she ran outside. (p. 130)

Fletcher was singularly successful in ensuring that her students’ voices were heard. She “would determinedly respect the children’s self-expression, while wincing and wishing a different self would express itself” (p. 131).

But some students almost never raise their voices in school. They have some consciousness about school, but part of that consciousness, or voice, says they have no right to let the other parts speak. Virginia Richardson and her colleagues (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989) describe Travis, a 10-year-old third grader who found school difficult and unsalvageably boring. Travis felt it was his duty to be silent in school—a feeling to which he acquiesced, even though nobody seemed to notice that “most of the time I do my work without talking” (p. 235).

He also felt he had no voice in the curriculum of the classroom because he was picked less often than smarter students and he never had free time because his work was never finished. Although he felt the injustice of this silencing, he would not change it “because it would be different for the teachers and they would probably forget things and the kids might not get as much learning . . . It wouldn’t be fair for the other kids” [if school were changed to suit him] (p. 235). Part of Travis’s personality—his consciousness, his voice—says, “Accept school: Be silent, even though school does not accept you and you reject it.” One of his voices silences another.
More than the girls Jones describes, Travis is waiting to be liberated. He would probably not offer a large challenge to someone who wanted to teach like Pat McLure. But what if students' voices loudly assert their right to be silent? How does a teacher avoid feeling defeated by voices saying, "Tell me what I have to learn and don't ask me to argue for my opinions or to take responsibility for negotiating the curriculum"? Such voices must first be heard and then confronted, respectfully but nevertheless decisively.

Theories about Knowledge and Schooling

Hearing such voices requires a feeling for the theories and beliefs that underlie them—beliefs about school knowledge, personal knowledge, and what it means to know. For example, many students (and their teachers) have histories that have led them to presume that school knowledge is created by authorities who are remote from students' personal lives and who, unlike students, have access to truth. School knowledge is, in this theory, a collection of facts, conventions, or bits of information that can be decisively judged right or wrong. Personal feelings or opinions are seen as subjective and thus irrelevant to school. Indeed, for some, gaining school knowledge is seen as severing one's personal connections with the object of study. In this view, school knowledge comes in hard, neat, and morally neutral packages that, once possessed, can be used for thinking, which is largely a procedural and individual rather than communal matter.

Because personal experience is not seen as legitimate within such a framework, teachers appear to be wasting time if they ask for personal responses to a novel, a film, or a TV program, or if they spend a lot of time listening to what students have to say about such topics. Teachers will appear unfair and inadequate authorities if they fail to deliver the necessary information for students to absorb or skills for them to practice.

Language, in this theory, is like a telephone wire—merely a vehicle for temporarily containing and transferring knowledge from one person to another. Packages of knowledge can be delivered through language without distortion provided the language users have no skill deficiencies. Difficulties in communication are interpreted as evidence of incompetence on the part of either transmitter or receiver. What might be a substantive difference of perspectives on the meaning and significance of a poem, for example, gets reduced to a technical question of correct usage or is dismissed as an irrelevant expression of opinion.

The social transactions supported by such theories are sustained by basal textbook programs, worksheets, and tests focused on noncontroversial knowledge (Johnston, 1992). Indeed, to be seen as fair, tests must pose only questions with answers that are beyond dispute—not "opinions." The constant efforts to standardize instruction and produce "standard outcomes" similarly insist on the centrality of noncontroversial knowledge and the irrelevance of personal knowledge. Within this framework, the teacher has no implicit need to listen except for purposes of correction. There is also little need for students to contribute perspectives.

An alternative theoretical framework casts knowledge as socially negotiated and personally significant. Knowledge is not experienced as separate from personal feelings, and all significant knowledge is value laden. Language, in this case, is a tool for making sense within communities. In this theory, atypical interpretations of writing or other cultural material are likely to become grounds for productive conversations in which everyone stands to acquire new perspectives that are not dismissed as "mere" opinions. This theory places at the center of the curriculum controversial knowledge and large intellectual projects that students can define in unique ways. Knowledge of noncontroversial information—conventions and skills—is subordinate.

Knowledge of controversial matters might include student stances on such questions as why the dinosaurs died out or what TV programs are most interesting. Current events, history, indeed all knowledge of consequence can be interrogated with respect to its reasonableness, significance, and moral and political implications. In this view, the good teacher would provide the conditions that permit ongoing inquiry in which students themselves take some authority. Students would take initiative for deciding what knowledge is worthwhile, how to gain that knowledge, and when it has been gained; that is, the curriculum would help students develop voice about the curriculum.

If students see controversial knowledge as an integral part of schooling and see schooling as the
development of their personal, intellectual (aesthetic, political, ethical) projects, they are likely to welcome teachers who provoke them to consider new perspectives. They will welcome opportunities to develop their own perspectives on matters about which the established authorities in our society disagree (and even on matters on which they appear to agree). Given a responsive school and a view of knowledge as socially constructed, students with this second theory of knowledge and authority are disposed to experience school as living rather than mere preparation for future living.

This kind of theorizing has been described in adults by Perry (1970) and Belenky and her colleagues (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Their work suggests that the second of these views of knowledge, authority, language, and self (the alternative theory noted above) generally develops only in the late teens and early twenties and then only in some individuals. But one can find views such as these in second grade students. One can even observe second grade students fluctuating between each of these theories (Nicholls & Hazzard, 1993).

For example, when given worksheets, which many of them interpreted as tests, Susan Hazzard’s second grade students would try to make her give them the answers, or give them clues so that they could be sure to answer most questions correctly. They became dependent and cautious. Yet, when facing controversial topics, such as the existence of witches or the reasons for the demise of dinosaurs, they were ready for intellectual adventure. They were eager to develop and debate their own positions and would discourage Hazzard from “giving lessons.”

This suggests that these theoretical stances that the children adopt involve different values (or motivations) more than they involve different levels of cognitive competence. The theories they normally use thus reflect different beliefs about the type of knowledge school should foster, rather than different capacities to understand the nature of knowledge.

These different theories about knowledge and schooling are unevenly distributed across groups of students. For example, students classified as having learning disabilities tend to view school knowledge as discrete facts, information, or skills, separate from personal knowledge. They tend to view their personal, out-of-school projects as something other than learning (Nicholls, McKenzie, & Shufro, in press). In other words, they experience school knowledge as factual and separate from personal knowledge.

Such a theory is also more common among lower-achieving students (Bryson, in press), among students in lower track classrooms (Jones, 1991; Page, 1991), and among students in lower socioeconomic groups (Anson, 1981). In other words, the very students who are most educationally vulnerable are likely to hold theories about knowledge that maintain their vulnerability.

Negotiating Theories

One might argue that these students have been “sold a bill of goods” by the dominant groups in society—that they have been sold the view that their personal knowledge is valueless whereas the knowledge possessed by the authorities is a most valuable commodity. Yet this is little comfort for teachers who hope to find students who want to make the question, what knowledge is of most worth, an integral part of the curriculum. It is not easy to face students who more or less insist that they be delivered lists of facts, of no particular interest to them, to memorize, yet who, at another level, realize this knowledge has little to do with their lives. It presents a difficult task for a teacher committed to fostering freedom and community among the students who are closer to the margins of our society. (For a discussion of the practical difficulties, see Boomer, 1992; Siegel & Skelly, 1992.)

Busch (in press) describes a project in which a fourth-grade teacher, Ada Harris, tried to shift her math instruction toward the assumptions of a constructivist view of knowledge. At the outset her students declared math boring and hard. Yet most of the children voiced strong resistance to their teacher’s suggestion that they might try more collaborative, problem-centered inquiry. Harris listened to their protests but proceeded with her new approach. As the months passed, most of the students were won over and their experience of math was transformed. Nonetheless, a small group, led by the eloquent and powerful Chakita, continued to insist that they be “made” to learn, that the teacher deliver knowledge and walk them through step-by-step procedures. Harris ultimately formed a separate group for those children and taught them in the way they demanded while the rest of the class, collaboratively and individually, increasingly took control of their own learning.
Sue Hazzard’s second-grade student, Peter, presented similar problems for her. In one class discussion, he declared, “There’s so much work and you’re always doing conversations and I’m not learning anything. In kindergarten I got information like a computer would. I can’t do that now. I knew all I had to know for first and second grade in kindergarten. It’s conversation, conversation, and we hardly get anything accomplished” (Nicholls & Hazzard, 1993, p. 172). Peter fluctuates between wanting to be given information to absorb, wanting to ask his own questions, and declaring that “you should go to your sources, not their sources” (p. 172). Peter spoke in these contradictory voices for most of the year.

But these two examples suggest there might be limits to how far teachers can and should go in challenging students’ views on the curriculum. If one is to respect students’ voices, one might argue with students like this, with all one’s wit, but use power as sparingly as possible—so long, that is, as they do not prevent others from developing more coherent and stronger voices. This is part of the course taken by some teachers, such as Ada Harris and Sue Hazzard.

Most of the resistance Harris encountered was from Chakita, who had been an outstanding student under the old regime of teacher-supplied algorithms. Chakita was determined to keep her place at the top of the class. In Hazzard’s class, Peter was often ruled by the same egotistical spirit. These students, their theories and dispositions, cannot be ignored because they will change the nature of the conversations in the classroom. Other students are often more cowed by the threat of their evaluations of their competence than of the teacher’s evaluations (Best, 1983; Nicholls & Hazzard, 1993). When Peter challenges the value of conversation (“I’m not learning anything . . . it’s conversation, conversation”), he is saying he doesn’t want his classmates’ voices to flourish. He is also challenging the method his teacher prefers to employ when faced with difficulties or disagreements in the classroom. In this way he challenges her teaching philosophy and the very idea of democratic talk. As Barber (1984) argues, in the tradition of Dewey.

Strong democratic talk entails listening no less than speaking. . . . “I will listen” means to the strong democrats not that I will scan my adversary’s position for weaknesses and potential trade-offs, nor even. . . that I will tolerantly permit him [sic] to say whatever he chooses. It means, rather, “I will put myself in his place, I will try to understand.”

Good listeners may turn out to be bad lawyers, but they make adept citizens and excellent neighbors . . . . Indeed, one measure of healthy political talk is the amount of silence it permits and encourages, for silence is the precious medium in which reflection is nurtured and empathy can grow. Without it there is only the babble of raucous interests and insistent rights vying for the deaf ears of impatient adversaries.” (pp. 174-175)

It is not enough, then, for the teacher to be a good listener. Helping students take their own voices seriously requires a classroom full of listeners.

Voice in the Democratic Classroom

If school is to foster student voice, conditions for democratic talk must be established in the classroom. This requires arranging the situation so certain kinds of talk become unlikely. Teachers cannot allow student voices that demagogy others. They must set a context in which peers are seen as valuable sources of ideas and solutions rather than as competitors. This means creating situations in which learning is a community interest as much as an individual one. It means combating the narrowing desire on the part of some students for a diet of dry facts and skills. This means that some voices will be muted.

Negotiating a democratic classroom is not easy, but we do have clues to how it might be done. When Karen Smith started the year with a group of low-income, urban sixth-grade students, she consciously sought to break the dichotomy between personal and school knowledge, and to encourage students to be curious and see one another as resources (Edelsky, 1991). Among many other things, she gave the students complex tasks that demanded initiative and judgment on the first day. She immediately encouraged them to use their judgment. She did not leave this up to them. At times, she was very directive.

For example, when she wanted everyone to move to a new location, she would often insist on precise following of her instructions. She was organized to prevent chaos, but also to encourage interest and initiative, reinforcing this by repeating, where relevant. “use your head,” and “do what is effective,” that is, do not follow rules blindly. She arranged the classroom community so that students could contribute to conversations, but she insisted that the conversations be democratic.

By displaying intense interest in student thoughts, ignoring those who would butt in, she conveyed the
importance of listening as well as the value of others’ ideas and experiences. She offered her students a deal that was new for them, and she kept clarifying and negotiating the details of the deal as the year progressed. Her students reciprocated (Edelsky, 1991).

The likelihood of democratic talk can also be increased by taking advantage of the fact that when students are asked to reflect on how to make learning arrangements fair for students of all levels of ability, the most favored option is having more able students help the less able (Thorkildsen, 1989). Even students identified as gifted see this as more fair than, for example, letting the more able students go on to new topics while others catch up on assignments (Thorkildsen, 1993). This means a teacher can ask a class, “What is fair to do when some people work hard but still have trouble finishing or understanding their work? Should we just leave them alone?” Almost all students will see this as unfair and will see helping as fair. The teacher can then steer the conversation to the specifics of classroom practices, including, for example, seating arrangements. Fairness of learning arrangements can become a classroom theme.

The initial act of asking students about what arrangements will help everyone learn in the fairest way could be seen as an act of coercion. It is one that is hard for students to resist because it is hard to oppose directly the idea that we should try to be fair. But what is not so obvious is that the teacher has defined the situation as a learning situation—one where the concern is to help all learn fairly—and not as a test or a contest. Peter and many children might otherwise presume that school is a contest in which it is their business to out-perform or even denigrate their peers. But when they are asked what is a fair way to deal with the fact that some students learn slower than others, they are likely to be seduced into accepting learning (and fair learning arrangements) as the point of school. They are also less likely to adopt an ego-involved stance in their learning.

Within such a context, students can begin to redefine their views of knowledge and of the point of schooling (Nicholls, 1994). They are more likely to see school as a place where brute facts and basic skills are subordinate to the diverse evolving views of what the curriculum should become in their classroom. They are also more likely to take seriously their own and each other’s multiple voices, engaging and challenging with respect even those voices they would prefer not to hear, as they must if they are to participate in a democracy.

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