Student Representation and Inclusion in Academic and Administrative Policymaking in Tertiary Education

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Introduction

Student underrepresentation and/or exclusion in academic and administrative decision- and policymaking such as curriculum design, development and/or administration remains a vital but neglected issue in tertiary education. This is not only because it is not discussed and embraced enough, but also because it is essentially a critical matter of power struggles, balance and its fairer distribution in the world of academia. I wondered why students are not usually included in policy decision-making in my institution. More specifically, I began to ask: *why do my learners not have any say in the making and running of the English Foundation programme?*

This small-scale qualitative study is an initial attempt at Exploratory Practice (EP). It intends to highlight the underlying roots of this issue through students' eyes and bring forth an alternative fresh perspective on an important topic. The study—inspired by a series of workshops held

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locally in my city of Izmir—was conducted at an English foundation programme of the preparatory school of a private university in Turkey. It aims at a deeper understanding and analysis of institutional underrepresentation (or no representation at all in plenty of cases) of learners in university administrative and academic boards whilst drawing up academic or administrative decisions and policies.

The study was conducted in a context with student researchers in two of the higher-level classes at the preparatory school of a private university in Turkey. It was part of a series of reading and writing classes at the English foundation programme where over a thousand students study for 28 contact hours weekly to pass the proficiency exam in order to be able to start their studies in their respective departments/faculties. Apart from reading and writing classes, learners also took courses such as listening and speaking and integrated skills. The results of the study were shared with both boards in question, with the aim that they inform future decisions to be made whilst designing and developing curricula/syllabi as well as seeking ways to improve student inclusion and representation in school-wide decision-/policymaking both academically and administratively.

The participants, in addition to me, were two CEFR B2-level learners at my former university where I was teaching reading and writing classes for a weekly 16 contact hours. It was a mixed-ability, nationality and language English Foundation Programme. There were 44 students, of whom 40 were Turkish and 4 non-Turkish students (a Peruvian, an Iraqi, a Somalian and a Macedonian). The average age was 18 and almost two thirds of both classes consisted of female students. Though their designated faculties varied, the majority were social sciences and engineering students. They were high-achieving learners with plenty of enthusiasm to improve their English for further study and work opportunities. Most had some history of learning and/or using English previously.

I was the teacher of the two classes in question, with substantial experience in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Turkey and abroad but relatively limited experience in teacher research. On top of my teaching duties, I was also coordinating the Professional Development Unit (PDU).

Literature Review

Academic rigour and concern to include learners in the making and running of curricula and syllabi is not a new argument. However, learners have long been, and are still, left out of proposals for curriculum design and development and its implementation (Carroll & Ryan, 2007). Policy- and decision-makers in schools around the globe, whether be it an academic matter or an administrative one, are still pushing their own agendas and continuing to ignore learners' potential. After decades of Communicative Language Teaching, the whole purpose of classroom practice has now dramatically shifted to student-centred and learner-led practices (Thornbury, 2006). Still, when it comes to planning and decision- and policymaking, apart from a few commendable individual efforts, sadly, there is still a lot more to do.

Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011) point to the necessity of co-creation of teaching and learning programmes and curricula and/or syllabi, especially with learners, arguing that it is the only tangible way to help learners achieve without overreliance on generic learning material and its synthetic teacher-student interaction. Twenty years earlier, Allwright and Bailey (1991) had hinted at the same problem, suggesting that this hinders facilitation of important learner and learning objectives such as learner agency, self-efficacy and autonomy, in an informed effort to yield higher-order thinking and learning skills.

When Nunan (1988) attempted to theorise the concept of learner-centred curriculum (and teaching) back then, his starting point was the negotiated curriculum but by creating and arguing its existence, he may unintentionally have paved the way for further discussion about who really owns classroom practice and how the power and authority inherent to it should be distributed in the twenty-first-century classroom. Norman and Spohrer (1996) argue that this is a tension and conflict that will perhaps never be reconciled so long as the student is seen as just another stakeholder.

The well-trodden argument to use learner-centred or negotiated curricula in language learning and teaching has more recently gained another perspective thanks to scholars such as Duch, Groh, and Allen (2001),

Polly and Hannafin (2010), Cullen, Harris, and Hill (2012), Savery (2015) and many others with the proposal to apply inquiry-based learning/teaching and problem-based learning (PBL) in curriculum in tertiary-level study to further reinforce goals. This has been praised for its simple but innovative and effective compatibility with learner and learning-centred pedagogy. Till now, however, this has not been linked to the principles of EP.

It has long been a topic of interest in ELT research that, to cope with the demanding and continually changing climate of the line of work, teachers need *sustainable* continuous professional development. However, realistically speaking, the question remains how this would materialise in a teacher's ever time-crunched and busy professional schedule. For some, the answer appears simple. Teachers can engage in professional development by doing it and by reading about or using it (Borg, 2010). Academia, on the other hand, has been wary of such individual, less formal, research activity (see the discussion in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Academic circles began to acknowledge teacher research more widely only towards the end of the 1990s in an attempt to help free teachers from their dependency on generic and formal research. Instead, collective teacher training and development activities (see, for example, Allwright, 1997) emerged, which aimed to equip teachers with more independence to become researchers and investigators of their own unique contexts and situations. Nowadays they do this and more, but more is yet to come. Until recently, both teachers and learners have struggled to be able to probe everyday issues in their classrooms.

Classic teacher research, particularly the earlier implementations, saw the classroom practice as separate from research and never had its integrity questioned. EP challenges this. It is an alternative to other forms of teacher research and is relatively a "newcomer" (Hanks, 2015). Hanks argues that EP brings together research and teaching simply by allowing practitioners to undertake research using everyday in-class pedagogical activities. These are called potentially exploitable pedagogic activities (PEPAs) and, it is suggested, do not require additional burdens such as designing traditional research instruments.

As Allwright and Hanks (2009) point out, EP is a form of research that does not reduce itself only to the profession of teaching. EP chooses to adopt a far wider scope by proposing that learners, teacher educators,

administrators as well as teachers, can engage in the practitioner research concept. This broadens its professional and scientific trajectory and implementation. EP does not detach pedagogy from research. Instead, it strives to mobilise *all* those involved in the learning and teaching process equally and actively. Thus, perhaps, it achieves the pedagogic fluidity that is good for teachers and students in the learning and teaching environment. EP takes many levels and layers of learner involvement. In this way, it offers a deep understanding and analysis of the issue at hand, without having to worry over the ever-dependent and variable "solutions" to "problems" (Hanks, 2015; Miller & Bannell, 1998). The next section describes my own engagement as a teacher and teacher researcher, as the co-ordinator of professional development in my institution, and as a novice exploratory practitioner.

Engaging in EP

My study began life during a series of local EP workshops I was invited to attend alongside around 15 other teachers sponsored by British Council Newton Katip Çelebi Fund and organised and delivered by Judith Hanks (University of Leeds) and Kenan Dikilitaş (Bahçesehir University). These workshops spanned about six months and were held in two parts (one series in June, the other in September) after which all the participants went back to further promote and conduct EP studies in their home institutions.

The workshops were, for me, surprisingly informal, friendly and reciprocally productive, included both input and output sessions in the form of seminars, individual and/or pair/group self-study, presentations, discussions and individual tutorial meetings for further mentoring and coaching purposes. Participants were from a range of backgrounds. They included senior teachers from local institutions working mainly in teaching or teacher training, as well as those from curriculum design and development. I was one of the three teacher researchers from my (former) university's preparatory programme and its PDU.

As part of the workshop agenda, we were each initially asked to come up with a puzzle of our own, something that for us had been provoking

our curiosity academically, professionally or administratively. I decided to work on student representation and inclusion at tertiary level as it had long been of interest to me.

At first, maybe quite normally, I was not too certain about what was really puzzling me about the topic. After the first of the input sessions, and more precisely, after the stage where we were asked to refine our puzzles through narrative writing and group/pair debriefings, I was eventually satisfied with my puzzle. I wanted to work on the question, *"Why are students as learners not included in the university decision-/policymaking?"*

Using My Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities as Data Collection Tools

I will now explain how I engaged with EP in my class. Since EP did not require an extra stand-alone procedure of research application and/or intervention (Allwright & Hanks, 2009), we were able to complete the whole study over two days in two separate sessions in a total of eight contact hours, plus an extra half day poster presentation. Below, I will try and give a brief description of the in-class pedagogic activities—namely, my procedure and how I formed the PEPAs.

> Using what the EP literature refers to as 'Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities', or PEPAs (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 157), may seem baffling at first. A novice might ask: What kind of pedagogic activities can be potentially exploited in this way? How is it possible to utilize 'normal classroom work' as a way of investigating a puzzle? EP argues that almost any communicative activity can be harnessed to this end. (Hanks, 2015, p. 615)

So, any routine learning and learner-centred communicative classroom activity a teacher seizes upon every day such as (but not limited to) pair or group work, discussions, debates, note-taking, poster presentation, essay writing, can be regarded as a PEPA and consequently as a data collection tool.

I had already briefed my learners on what they were expected to do and why, and they were all very excited and supportive but did not know

anything further. I had planned the whole implementation scheme in such a way that our research topic would overlap with the language topic in the syllabus. I felt this would ensure a smoother and more natural learning and learner experience.

Day I

Activity 1: Warmer

As a warm-up activity, I wrote my puzzle on the board and asked my students to discuss and comment on it in pairs. I asked them to consider the ways in, and the extent to which they are included in academic and administrative affairs at the school for an initial personal reaction. They were very engaged but surprised at the task.

Activity 2: Reading

Then they read an article from their course book on student-led and student-centred learning that introduced the idea of negotiated syllabi and inquiry-based learning and PBL. They drew parallels with their own situations, trying to explain how and why this was so. Interestingly, they had real difficulties in identifying themselves with student-centred learning.

Activity 3: Speaking and Writing

They then brainstormed in groups of three or four and made notes on possible causes for their difficulties. Different groups focused on different perspectives and aspects—of learners, teachers and administration—and later exchanged ideas and debated as whole class who or what might be responsible, and how and why.

Although they were not required to come up with any solutions—as is the case in general with EP—I had advised them to come up with a motto representative of their group, which was also featured in their posters as their 'hooks.'

Day II

Activity 4: Poster Presentation: Preparation

They worked with their partners to prepare short poster presentations of 5–10 minutes. Many were making notes on important aspects they wanted to draw upon. Using the materials they had brought, such as felt-tip pens/crayons, coloured papers, various cut-up pieces from old magazines and newspapers, glue sticks and scissors, they prepared their posters to share with the whole class and the whole school the following week. They did this work both inside and outside class.

Day III: One Week Later

Activity 5: Poster Presentation: During and After

Each group delivered their poster presentations in the conference hall, where there were other students, teachers and some members of the administration. This was followed by a longer individual Q&A mingle session and short plenary debate/discussion with two opposing sides at the very end where two students took minutes for a short report to be shared with the management.

   The posters stayed up for another week for fellow students and colleagues who had been unable to make it to the event. The event elicited some very positive comments as well as controversial ideas.

Analysing Data

For me, this was a small-scale qualitative EP study set off in search of a puzzle I had had for some time: *why do my learners not have any say in making and running of the English Foundation programme?* In-class pedagogic activities such as brainstorming, note-taking, pair and group work, cluster discussions were used for data collection and analysis. Whilst analysing the data, we (the learners and I) tried to create new meanings of what had been said in poster presentations.

Interpreting and Discussing the Results

Whilst interpreting the data, the students could be divided into two main (rather basic) categories. They chose to identify themselves and one another as:

(a) Romantics, who seemed to really dissect and analyse the problem for a better understanding and maybe for a change but who also at the same time possibly ran the risk of detachment from reality.
(b) Realists, who doubted their own (and others') capacities in the first place, and who were largely uninterested or oblivious to the possibilities of influencing policy decisions around curriculum design.

Though they varied in depth of engagement, the students were very keen on each component of the study. Their discussions spawned some really interesting categories that encompassed management, teaching and learning as well as related factors of a parental or cultural nature. To sum up, the possible issues that the students noted during the plenary debate could be formulated as follows:

1. The management always has an overriding agenda and it takes precedence over what teachers and students have to say or feel.
2. Historically, education in Turkey has always been very teacher-fronted and students are used to being passive recipients.
3. Thanks to the elite, distant and out-of-touch policymakers in the nation's capital, tedium both for teachers and students has been rife, and this can lead to imminent educational burn-out.
4. Culturally, parents have become part of the big picture, often condoning or praising a distorted reality.
5. Students never really stand up to the real problem or its creators since doing so might well mean leaving their comfort zone. They are reluctant to gain and practise new knowledge and learning.
6. Unfortunately, policymakers in schools are not always people with the right professional and personal tools such as qualifications and/or experience or suitable character traits in the Turkish education context.

7. Most systems, whether from a political or a societal view, tend to be centripetal/centrist, often almost completely discarding individualism.

Some key concepts highlighted by the Romantics from their posters (in their own words) included:

1. *"It's not our fault, or either yours, teacher. It's this bloody classic top-down system in Turkey in general that utterly is a disgrace and needs changing."*
2. *"Students, teachers and parents should be more active and outspoken."*
3. *"We surely need training in this. Will you help us teacher?"*
4. *"Education should be free for all."*
5. *"Plenty more romantic teachers and individuals are needed!"*
6. *"We must stop being nice and cooperative!"*

Even students who thought they could really do something together for a change had some scruples as to how they might facilitate a change. Their argument could not go beyond well-wishing and was both simplistic and political, giving a strong sense of romanticism and naivety. However, their motivation and participation was superb. They highlighted the fact that the whole understanding and rationale behind the education system both on macro and micro levels needed an overhaul as well as equal redistribution. Teachers, as well as their students, they argued, must be the real owners of any classroom practice and all else that takes place within its ever-expansive boundaries (Goswami & Stillman, 1987). They noted that teachers and students desperately need to reclaim their home turfs (classrooms) and that all should happen there afterward, not on management floors. Further, they pointed out certain educational policies in Turkey, irrespective of their political or party origins, which have always sold well in a country that is rather controlled.

On the other hand, the Realists posited some really doubtful ideas and personal beliefs that were likely to have influenced their partners' ideas as well:

1. *"We cannot be part of this process simply because we are not trained in it."*
2. *"As learners, I don't think we should be doing it since we cannot be completely disaffected or impartial."*
3. *"It must be teachers' duty and specialism only to design, develop, amend or run curriculum. Students cannot do it!"*
4. *"How can we fully know whether we are doing the right things or not with our little or zero knowledge and experience?"*
5. *"The management won't accept our membership anyway!"*

This cluster of responses, though pessimistic, had substance. Roughly speaking, the arguments listed there spanned two major aspects: (a) students are not trained enough to become a real part of this issue, and realistically and strictly speaking there is no resource or time to do so; (b) even if they have been trained in this, they do not think they or their friends should be involved in a policy- or decision-making mechanism, as they cannot be impartial or disinterested, and therefore they would always skew things for their own benefit.

Ironically, the spirit of the group slowly began to run the risk of turning into a sloppy soap after a while, with emotions overriding logic. Heated and aggressive debates at times replaced solidarity and level-headedness. The topic had clearly touched a nerve. However, both the students and myself were aware of the vehemence of the topic and the mood quickly gave way to robust professionalism as soon as work began on the poster presentations.

Both parties shared some core values as well. For one thing, almost all students agreed there were serious problems regarding the way they had been governed in their schools. For another, they said they knew too well that this change—though hard to gain—would be a real game changer.

I could not help but think of two famous analogies from Freire's (1996) book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire talks of teacher-student relationships, which convey an incongruous summary of all the educational meddling and inactivity despite all the reciprocal goodwill. In the first analogy, he paints a really pessimistic picture and reduces teacher-student relationship to a nature of a *narrative character*:

A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness. (Freire, 1996, p. 71)

In the second one, he wryly likens the education system to a *banking system* in which students are *depositories* and teachers *depositors*:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (Freire, 1996, p. 72)

Puzzled and shaken, I suddenly began to see Freire's work through totally new eyes. Who exactly were the oppressed he was referring to in his book? Teachers? Learners? Both? The system itself? Or another unseen, uncanny force?

I will try and look more closely into how I am poised to interpret the abovementioned findings and their reflection based on my particular stance and that of my students. My puzzling journey continues.

Reflections

As the students finally wrote up and used their mottos in their poster presentations, our puzzle and its deeper understanding and analysis spanned a number of strata:

• Learner-centred and learner-led curriculum/programme and/or syllabus design, development and implementation is an integral part of student inclusion into both administrative and academic affairs. Yet most schools fail to do so

- Though it is of great interest and concern to them, students do not know how to become part of this process formally. Perhaps they should receive formal training?
- They should definitely be better informed of, and integrated into this process, and should also be better represented in decision-making boards. They need managerial and academic support to do so.
- They hold serious reservations as to whether they can remain non-manipulative; one of the core issues of student-led and student-centred education. They need a knowledgeable and impartial other to advise and mediate.

For my students, as they reported, the whole experience, though (perhaps because) quite challenging, was one of the most liberating in their educational lives. Working on a more even playing field, they were a major and equal part of instruction and of the teaching and learning continuum; thus they were the 'doers' and 'beholders'.

More importantly, they noted the way we carried out these particular classes together. It was apt given the overarching topic we explored as part of this EP research. EP was, they said, significantly *empowering* and academically *uplifting* for their 'voices were really heard'. I could not help but think this alone encompassed most of the (core) principles of EP, particularly number 1 and 2 which discuss quality of life (QoL) and Understanding both for the learners and teacher (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, pp. 149–154).

On many occasions, I saw them struggle to steer the lessons in the right direction on their own as I had purposely chosen to adopt a much quieter role, one that they were not accustomed to no matter how active they had been in the classes. I was acting as more of a facilitator, mentor or resource. I believe that this was the biggest learning curve for them, as I believe my students generally learn better when they go really deeply into something. When they are really puzzled, pedagogy and modes of instruction become inquiry-based.

For me personally, the most intriguing part of this EP study was to be able to align PEPAs with research methodology and to analyse and present the final results just like during the initial EP input workshops I had attended. Of course, I faced many ups and downs. It was definitely harder

work for me professionally to be working alongside my learners in comparison to the mentor/supervisor hat I usually don in school. Nevertheless, I felt it was really satisfying to practise alongside my students as one big investigation unit and probe into such a problematic but often avoided subject. I began to see it through their eyes.

Personally and professionally, I felt further satisfaction when I had an opportunity to present this study at an IATEFL ReSIG conference. I was happy that it elicited an extremely positive interest and reception. A lot of the conference-goers in my session told me that such topics are of great interest and concern to them and thus should be given much more coverage. I felt the research could have been further extended had a few of my students volunteered to stand in front of that wider education community and narrate their accounts first-hand. However, this would have been a big challenge for them. I was glad that some of them were present at the conference and those who could attend watched my session while sitting in the back rows, smiling.

For the management, however, this, once an innocent small-scale study, spawned some really decisive results they will not be able to ignore. For one thing, they witnessed how professional and meticulous students can be during academic work with far wider and higher implications for the learner and learning process. Most importantly, this challenged a great fallacy they held: that students do not often take responsibility for their own learning. Also, thanks to the poster presentations and annual international ELT conference, it managed to catch the attention of the rectorate and I was promised that it would be included in the agenda of the next plenary board meeting with a view to enhance student inclusion and representation in academic and administrative decision-making all across the university.

Conclusion

As a new teacher researcher, I can happily say EP came into play with its sheer strength in my classroom setting. Since its foundations encourage feelings of solidarity and membership, it enables and empowers its participants to explore and study anything they wish on an even playing

field, free of hierarchy and in far greater depth. I would definitely like to conduct more EP in the future and preferably in collaboration with other colleagues.

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