



Empowering teacher voices in an education policy discussion: Paradoxes of representation



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The realisation of teacher voice in an international policy workshop was investigated.
- Voices are enabled and constrained by repertoire, social position, topics and gatekeepers.
- Paradoxically, the teachers whose voices were most dominant in the teacher workshop were also the least typical.

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the problems and paradoxes of attempting to empower teacher voices within the context of an international conference of policy-makers, academic researchers and practitioners. We examine the distribution of talk within a teacher workshop: who spoke, how, and to whom did the group and broader audiences listen? We trace the emergence of ideas in the workshop discussions and their trajectory into the joint teacher-policy-maker panel in the conference and in the post-conference summary report. We identify four factors shaping the realisation of teacher voice – repertoires, social position, topics and gatekeepers – and highlight paradoxes of teacher representation.

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Teachers are the end-point of educational reform – the last to hear, the last to know, the last to speak. They are mainly the objects of reform, not its participants.

(Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011, p. 1)

How should education policy be developed? Who should be involved in deliberations about curriculum, testing, teaching, and teachers? In addition to education professionals, many parties have a stake in such decisions: parents of schoolchildren, prospective employers of school graduates, and indeed the public at large have a clear interest in the values, norms and skills cultivated through the educational system. Therefore, it is understandable and justified that education policy is politicised – the focus of extensive media

coverage, public debate and political jockeying. However, a frequent and unfortunate result of the intensification of political and public involvement in educational deliberations has been the marginalisation of teachers' participation. This outcome is doubly problematic: as the adults closest to classrooms and schools, teachers possess critical knowledge and expertise about the issues under discussion and, furthermore, they are among the members of the public with the greatest and most direct stake in the policies developed.

This article is about an attempt to carve out a space for teacher involvement in education policy deliberations, about the problematics of *teacher voice*. Specifically, we explore an international teacher workshop, which was designed specifically to empower teacher voices, and which we facilitated. We look closely at this project of giving voice to teachers, and especially at the difficulties and paradoxes it raises. We employ the linguistic anthropological notion of voice as the capacity to make oneself heard and understood in one's own terms (Blommaert, 2006, p. 240), and use related tools to investigate the conditions necessary for exercising voice in the workshop.

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While numerous observers have called for greater teacher voice in the policy process – indeed, support for such a project appears widespread and unanimous – very little attention has been devoted to the actual mechanics of this process. Herein lies the primary contribution of this article: close examination of the workshop interactional dynamics highlights key challenges facing teacher voices and attempts to empower them. Specifically, we identify four factors shaping the realisation of teacher voice – repertoires, social position, topics and gatekeepers – and highlight paradoxes regarding the conditions for effective teacher representation.

Before completing this introduction we should say a word about our own voices and positions within the article. As participants in the design and facilitation of the workshop we naturally have an interest in reflecting on and improving our work – indeed, this practical interest was our point of departure, and we return to it in the concluding discussion. However, our personal, situated reflection gave way to consideration of the broader theoretical issues that we think are more important than our story as workshop facilitators.

1. Teacher voice in education policy processes

Two decades ago Cohn and Kottkamp (1993) lamented the “absence of teachers from the dialogue and decision-making on [educational] reform”, arguing that “efforts to improve education are doomed to failure until teachers become respected partners in the process” (p. xvi). Concurrently, writing about reforms in England and Wales, Hargreaves (1994) echoed this sentiment, noting that “in the political rush to bring about reform, teachers’ voices have been largely neglected, their opinions overridden, and their concerns dismissed” (p. 6). While the critical importance of empowering teacher voice in education policy processes is now commonly recognised (e.g. Bangs, Galton, & MacBeath, 2011; Gyurko, 2012; Levinson, Blackwood, & Cross, 2012; Smyth & Shacklock, 1998), very little research has been conducted on how this might actually be accomplished.¹

Researchers, reformers and activists have advanced a number of arguments for the amplification of teacher voice in policy processes. First, teachers possess privileged knowledge about the complex realities of teaching, which is critical for the development of good policy (McDonald, 1988). Second, since teachers are among those most responsible for carrying out the policies adopted, their sense of ownership of policy is crucial to its effective implementation (Bangs & Frost, 2012). Indeed, Gyurko (2012) shows that teachers who feel that their voices are heard are less likely to leave the profession. Fourth, teacher participation in the education policy process helps to fulfil a core principle of deliberative democracy: “The normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes” (Young, 2000; pp. 5–6).

Yet, as the authors of a recent survey of U.S. teachers noted, “teachers are again in the spotlight of reform, and most (69%) do not feel their voices are adequately heard in current debates about education” (Markow & Pieters, 2011, p. 11; see also Bangs & Frost, 2012). Moreover, the recent global wave of reforms emphasizing testing and accountability, together with the politically expedient strategy of blaming teachers for educational shortcomings, have in some cases led to further marginalisation of teacher voices (e.g., Beck, 2008; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011).

Scholarship about teacher voice in policy processes has focused more on *why* teacher voice is important than on *how* it might be empowered, and very few have explored *what* happens when teachers attempt to raise their voices. Specific means that have been suggested include teacher participation in consultative processes such as soundings (Primary Review, 2007) and focus groups (Dozier, 1993); representation through unions and professional associations (Casey, 2007); and active engagement of teachers in public debates, especially through participation in mass media (Cohen, 2010; Thomas, 2011) and on-line social networks (Gyurko, 2012).

To our knowledge, only two studies have investigated empirically processes of empowering teacher voice. McDonald (1986, 1988) documented an informal teacher study group as they moved from collegiate sharing, to taking an interest in policy, and to developing knowledge and theory. A key issue he highlights in reflecting on this work is the gap between the participating teachers’ intuitive understandings of their work as uncertain and complex, and its representation in policy discussions as relatively straightforward, orderly and predictable. Navarro (1992) analysed issues of voice in an interview-based study of teachers and university professional development school collaboration. She concludes that “simply turning on the dialogic hose to let loose the flow of teachers’ ideas is not a simple matter” (p. 14). Rather, she identifies three dilemmas that emerged in the reform. First, voices are in tension: specifically, the university professors, haunted by a history of problematic encounters with school teachers, feared that speaking openly about their concerns might alienate and silence the participating teachers. Second, institutional pressures to appoint representatives jeopardised the democratic nature of the collaboration. Third is the tension between teachers’ voices and the reform agenda: what happens when teachers don’t say what reformers want to hear?

The current article builds on these studies’ emphases on the complexity and problematic nature of teacher voice. Two limitations of these studies, however, bear mention. First, the studies examine teacher voice in the singular, rather than acknowledging the diversity of voices among teachers and the tensions between different teacher perspectives (cf. Hargreaves, 1996). Second, while these studies shed light on the difficulties teachers encounter in finding and raising their voices, they do not look at how those voices are received. We have found linguistic anthropological concepts and tools useful in addressing these issues.

2. Problems of voice

What does having – or giving – “voice” entail? Above we adopted Blommaert’s (2006) definition of voice, which he attributes to Hymes (1996), as the capacity to make oneself heard and understood in one’s own terms. A major focus of Hymes and other researchers in the ethnography of communication tradition has been to understand the social distribution of different ways of speaking, and the implications that this has for social justice and equality (see e.g. Blommaert, 2006, 2007; Hymes, 1996; Juffermans & van der Aa, 2011; Maybin, 2012). So, for an example taken from the educational field, Cazden writes about how two African American students who never spoke in their regular Harvard University graduate course frequently participated in a session of the same course offered in the evening as part of an adult education extension program. One of the men explained the change: “In the morning class people talk about some article that the rest of us haven’t read. That shuts us out. [In the evening] people talk from their personal experience.” (Hymes, 1996, p. 110). Having a voice in the morning entailed a different set of discursive practices – with regard to content, but also, it is implied, to accent, style, genres and more – than having a voice in the evening. The capacity and authority to speak in such a way, or *repertoire*, is unevenly distributed

¹ Academic interest in teacher voice has primarily been concerned with issues of how “we” researchers represent “them” teachers who serve as our research subjects, participants or collaborators (e.g. Atkinson & Rosiek, 2009; Goodson, 1991; Hargreaves, 1996). While such issues are clearly also salient in this article, our main focus is on teachers’ voices in policy discussions rather than academic accounts.

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