



ICSEI

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Student Voice: A Catalyst for Educational Change

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## ICSEI Monograph Series

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## From the Four-Part Series Editor

ICSEI offers a platform for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to engage in salient school effectiveness and school improvement (SESI) discourse. It is in this spirit that the four-part monograph series was developed; to both highlight cutting edge scholarship in SESI and to illuminate discussions from the annual ICSEI conference. Each of the four monographs in this series addresses a global SESI area, coupling empirical evidence with issues raised during the ICSEI 2015 symposium, "Networks for Change: Global Perspectives, Local Practices." The monographs conclude with implications for policy, research, and practice.

The four-part series features:

### **Local Innovation and Autonomy in Contexts of Standardization and Accountability**

*Stephen Anderson, Professor, University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education*

This monograph draws upon data from a comparative investigation of school effectiveness characteristics in 22 Ontario elementary schools selected for variation in performance on provincial tests (high and low) relative to other schools in comparable demographic contexts (mid/high and low SES). Anderson responds to the inquiry, "If everybody is doing the same things, why do we continue to see gaps in student performance between schools?" He calls to question whether meaningful opportunities for innovation and its



diffusion can co-exist with the pervasive press for standardization in education goals, outcomes and best practices.

### **How do We Create and Exchange Knowledge for Systemic Change?**

*Louise Stoll, Professor of Professional Learning, London Centre for Leadership in Learning, UCL Institute of Education*

A national R&D project, involving the UCL Institute of Education and Challenge Partners, a national network of over 300 schools, explores how middle leaders (department chairs and teacher leaders) contribute to effective practices by sharing knowledge, engaging in joint practice development, and leading and tracking colleagues' change across schools. Stoll explores the question, "Who are the key players in the middle tier between government and schools, and what role should researchers play?" Her study focuses on familiar ICSEI territory of creating collaborative cultures within and between schools – professional learning communities.

### **Student Voice: A Catalyst for Educational Change**

*Dennis Shirley, Professor, Lynch School of Education, Boston College*

This paper presents a study of cross-national networks for school improvement and educational change. Shirley reports on findings from an educational network organized by the Alberta Teachers' Association in Canada, the Center for International Mobility Organization, and the National Board of Education in Finland, a learning exchange change network that brought



principals, teachers, and high school students from two jurisdictions together to learn about similarities and differences between the two systems and to engender their own strategies for change. He responds to a question, “How can we improve learning, and do so in a way that students have opportunities to express and develop their opinions on matters both large and small?”

## **Exceptional Effectiveness: Taking a Comparative Perspective on Educational Performance**

*Alma Harris, Institute of Education, University College London  
& Andy Hargreaves, Boston College*

This monograph argues that more contemporary empirically-based comparative studies in the SESI field are needed to counter the pervasive influence of popular interpretations of large-scale assessments, such as PISA. At the 2015 ICSEI Congress, a symposium that focused on the opportunities and challenges facing the SESI field explored the relationship between comparative effectiveness, performance, and measurement. The catalyst for a group discussion within this symposium was a comparative study of high performance in three sectors - education, business, and sport - and a recent analysis of the leadership associated with high performance in these three sectors. This monograph proposes that such comparative analyses across sectors and systems offer much deeper insights into the process of educational reform in diverse educational settings. The monograph also addresses the question, “Is co-opetition (a synergistic relation between competition and collaboration) a dynamic opportunity or a grudging necessity in exercising uplifting



leadership that enhances improvement in schools and school systems?”

The authors and I hope the series will encourage ICSEI members to utilize the annual conference as a place to not only share cutting edge research and SESI practices but to also engage in collaboration that generates new contributions to the field.

Helen Janc Malone (editor)

Institute for Educational Leadership (U.S.)



# Student Voice: A Catalyst for Educational Change

Dennis Shirley,  
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## Abstract

This paper presents a study of cross-national networks for school improvement and educational change. The paper reports on findings from an educational network organized by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) in Canada, the Center for International Mobility Organization (CIMO), and the National Board of Education in Finland. Alberta and Finland demonstrate that systems can pursue very different strategies while attaining outstanding performance results on the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). Alberta has for years had detailed academic standards and provincial testing, while Finland has had flexible curricular guidelines and no national testing except a secondary-school leaving examination. To learn more about their different systems, the Canadians and the Finns sponsored a learning exchange change network that brought principals, teachers, and high school students from the two jurisdictions into direct communication with one an-



other to learn about similarities and differences between the two systems and to engender their own strategies for change. This monograph highlights the Alberta study, while also drawing on a ICSEI 2015 symposium discussion, "Networks for Change: Global Perspectives, Local Practices."





# Introduction

At the close of the eighteenth century Immanuel Kant composed what was to become one of his most famous essays entitled “Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” Kant’s response to his question is that for enlightenment to occur, it is necessary to overcome one’s intellectual dependency on others (or “selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit” in the original German) to exercise one’s own unique voice (1793/1999). This *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit* or “education for voice” became the title of an essay by Theodor Adorno (1971), who argued that schools have an ethical and civic responsibility to prepare students to criticize and correct societal injustices.

It might appear that in an age when economic outcomes increasingly are used to gauge the merits of every school system the perspectives of Kant and Adorno are irrelevant—that we live among the residue of a bygone era when educators held different kinds of values and aspired to different kinds of goals. This absence of interest in student voice is pervasive. Whenever the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) issues the latest findings from the Programme for International Student Assessment



(PISA), the media invariably focus on a given jurisdiction's test results, although there is an abundance of other important material released with each study, as well as many other ways of gauging whether school systems are meeting their espoused goals.

Headlines tend to emphasize highly ranked systems without really exploring the cultural complexities or the correlation between subjective misery with high achievement. In a recent PISA report (OECD, 2013), high-achieving South Korean students were ranked 65th out of 65 jurisdictions on a measure of student well-being in school, indicating that their academic results come at an enormous human cost. Yong Zhao (2014) has described how students in China are pervasively tested and ranked, with their ranking against their peers publicized on a monthly and sometimes, even weekly basis. The Ministry of Education in Singapore is endeavoring to overcome its tradition of teaching to the test through a policy of "teach less, learn more," but educators are responding cautiously, especially in heavily tested subjects, with little attention given to issues of student voice in citizenship education (Gopinathan, 2013).



For years, Alberta, Canada, has been a global high achiever, although, as with the rest of Canada, it has recently been experiencing a decline in its math results (Brochu et al, 2013, p. 30). Still, even with its many strengths, the school system in Alberta has historically suffered one of the highest high school dropout rates of all of Canada's provinces (Richards, 2009). Dropout rates have been especially high for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth, with their graduation rates fluctuating at about 44%. Although the educational problems of Alberta are a far cry from those suffered by schools in many systems, it is still easy to find teachers in Alberta who feel unappreciated by the public and micro-managed by government when it comes to the freedom to develop innovative curricula.

Finnish schools, on the other hand, are famous for the gentle pace of their curriculum, equity, in terms of student achievement outcomes, and top rankings of PISA without the high levels of competitiveness that characterize East Asian school systems, for example. The relatively low rankings of Finnish students on indicators of feeling good in school may be reflective of a certain hardy stoicism that characterizes the national culture rather than the internal school climate. There are three Finnish student unions that are large



and diverse; they represent vocational students, Finnish-speaking students, and the Swedish-speaking minority. They keep abreast of educational policy and advocate for student interests in a society in which union membership is highly valued as a mechanism for social inclusion and equity.

The complex, on-the-ground realities of life in schools as they exist means that educational work is far from done, even when achievement results are high or climbing in the right direction. High results on tests such as PISA in China and Vietnam indicate that peak results are compatible with the silencing of student voice. However, modern democracies are founded on the premise that it is only when citizens learn how to exercise voice that they can participate in collective self-governance. Furthermore, almost all of world's nations have signed on to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 of the Convention states that governments "shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the view of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990).



Unless one is ready to repudiate this internationally sanctioned right, educators have a moral responsibility to design schools in such a way that students have opportunities to develop their own perspectives by gradually exercising more voice and taking on more responsibility (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2008). Unfortunately, research (Cook-Sather, 2006) indicates that we know very little about how students' participation can contribute to school development. As a consequence, an important research question has become, How can we improve learning, and do so in a way that students have opportunities to express and develop their opinions on matters both large and small?

## **Soliciting Student Voice: A Multilayered Approach**

One currently popular educational change strategy is to network educators together in a belief that by exposing classroom teachers to novel practices in different settings, they will want to probe more deeply into improving their teaching (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, 2012; Harris, 2008). Only rarely, however, have educators included students in such networks. Finland and Alberta have recently explored the sharp edge of educational change in what is termed the Finland-Alberta or "FINAL" partnership.



Launched in May 2010 at a Finnish-Canadian Education Forum in Helsinki, this alliance began with conversations about opportunities and challenges in educational change that both jurisdictions faced. This first meeting in Spring 2010 seeded many ensuing conversations and exchanges, with follow up meetings in August in Jasper, Alberta, and in November in Boston, Massachusetts. At these events both jurisdictions identified aspirational goals and developed an action plan to attain them. This culminated in December 2010 with letters of understanding exchanged between the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), the Minister of Education in Alberta, and the Center for International Mobility Organization (CIMO) of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture in Helsinki. I was invited to provide technical assistance to the project and to conduct research of the key participants through interviews and analysis of documents such as journals, web sites, films, artwork, and social media that were created as part of FINAL's activities (Lam & Shirley, 2012).

The first step for this nascent partnership was for a Finnish delegation to visit select high schools in Alberta. An invitational symposium, *Educational Futures – International Perspectives on Innovation from the Inside Out* was held in Edmonton, Alberta in March 2011. This pioneering international part-



nership took flight with a team of 13 Finnish high school principals and ministry officials visiting Albertan high schools in Crowsnest Pass, Calgary, Edmonton, and Grande Prairie. The Finns thus had opportunities to familiarize themselves with secondary education in Alberta's two largest cities, a medium-sized city, and a rural school. Two months later, 19 Alberta educators made their journey to Finland to be acquainted with approaches taken in Finnish schools. The Alberta delegation visited schools in Helsinki, Turku, Kitee, Seinäjoki, Vasa, Kajaani, and Valkeakoski.

What did educators aspire towards through this high level exchange? The overarching objective of the partnership was to explore the question of what makes for a good school. The genesis of this question was drawn from prior deliberations, including those of an international panel of experts, in helping to develop a long-term strategy for educational change in Alberta. The key driver for this change was outlined in a report entitled "A Great School for All—Transforming Education in Alberta Schools" (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2012). The report drew extensively on "Fourth Way" change architecture as proposed by Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2009, 2012).



In pursuing the change strategies proposed in the Fourth Way theory of action, one early decision was to include high school students themselves directly in the partnership. To do so, the ATA selected school leaders who themselves cultivated student voice in their schools. They needed educators who would look beyond many of the contemporary reforms that emphasize testing and accountability to recover a broader vision of education that included civic engagement as a core purpose of democratic schooling. They also needed educators who would understand the student voice not as a managerial tactic but as a democratic imperative (Fielding, 2004).

One of the educators that the ATA recruited to FINAL was Jean Stiles, the principal of Jasper Place High School in Edmonton, the capital city of Alberta. Stiles was the 2007 recipient of the highly competitive award, "Canada's Most Outstanding Principals." Her school is the largest high school in western Canada, and Stiles has been a strong proponent of student voice in the district for many years. Drawing upon her conviction that students need to become agents in their own education, Stiles created in 2011 a "Global Café" at Jasper Place that provided students with a coordinator who encourages students to hold critical conversations with one another about the nature





of their education and their aspirations for their society in the context of an increasingly complex and volatile world. Stiles was concerned that student voice would be developed in ways that allow educators to best capitalize on their students' many critical insights into the nature of their society without simplistically blaming schools for the many unresolved social inequities that they are too often unrealistically expected to overcome.

High school students at Jasper Place have used the Global Café as a setting for concerts, art installations, and after-school meetings and conviviality. A full-time coordinator solicits student opinions on things that can be done to improve the school and issues they can address in their community and their province. The Global Café is an open and inviting space where one can meet with students and where they can develop their own activities with a young coordinator who relates easily to them. By experiencing a school culture of inclusiveness and deliberation that preceded participation in FINAL, Jasper Place students who went to Finland were able to bring a critical disposition to Finnish education and to notice aspects of schooling in the Nordic nation that both appealed to them and struck them as limited in scope.



What have been some key findings from student voice in the FINAL partnership? Early on, Finnish students were surprised at the degree of informality and overall school spirit they encountered in Canada. In Finland, there is no school-based equivalent to the North American concept of “extracurricular activities.” This means that there is no parallel set of programs and activities to engage students who might be struggling in academic subjects but still eager to show that they can excel in other venues. Finnish students were surprised at the relaxed conviviality they witnessed in Canadian schools, such as when high school teachers and students faced off against one another in a game of floor hockey during a regular school day. They were also impressed with the way that students from Jasper Place advanced their own views about their school with aspirations and expectations that it could be changed for the better. The Finns described their relations with their teachers back home as much more formal and traditional.

One puzzling dimension of Finland’s high results on PISA for many observers has been related to the pedagogical conservatism of its teachers. It is intriguing that for all that has been said and debated about Finland in recent years, few, if any claims have been made about instructional innovation. It



was therefore, a welcome experience for Finnish students, as well as their peers from Alberta, to attend conferences organized by the ATA and CIMO that solicited their opinions on the research question of what makes for a good school. These sessions provided for a wide range of activities for the students to develop their opinions and to improve schools in their given national contexts.

Did any of these dimensions have impact on student voice in one way or the other? One outcome from the partnership is telling. In 2013, Alberta's high school students learned that their Legislative Assembly was preparing to cut educational funding. Activist students decided to respond by organizing a demonstration to protest the cuts. The students used social media to lead demonstrations, and they also used the media to place pressure on their elected officials to retain the funding. The first Twitter account, #EdStake, was created by students running a campaign for greater student voice in regard to the cutbacks. The second Twitter account, #TBOE (for "taking back our education"), was used to mobilize student activists for the demonstration. Throughout this time frame, the students collaborated with the Alberta Federation of Labor to provide buses to take them from their schools to the



rally in June 2013 in front of the state capital.

It is not necessary for students to travel to Finland to learn to protest budget cuts at home, and the overwhelming majority of students who attended the demonstration in Edmonton, Alberta's capital city, had played no part in FINAL. Still, the students who had participated in the FINAL partnership learned to question the organization and cultures of schooling, with those from Jasper Place taking the lead. Their experiences with student dialogue in the Global Café and in the FINAL partnership had encouraged them to express voice in civil society.

In the end, most of the budget cuts proposed in the Legislative Assembly were approved. As a consequence, the students learned that they could not merely engage in protests but would instead have to take a more proactive role in shaping policy. They learned that students in Ontario and New Brunswick had the right to representation on school boards. Consequently, the students re-organized themselves and engaged with a student-led group, "Student Voice Alberta" to win a key victory: in the future, they would be empowered to elect a student trustee to serve on the Board of Trustees of the



Edmonton Public Schools. In November 2014, the first such student, Johanna Koh, was elected to the Board of Trustees, with the story covered under the headline "First Student Trustee Makes History" (<http://www.epsb.ca/news/boardoftrustees/firstelectedstudenttrusteemakeshistory.html>).

For their part, the Finnish students were impressed with the Global Café at Jasper Place High School, and they returned home to work with their educators to create similar venues in their schools. It is not enough to have formal mass membership in a student union or to go to an occasional demonstration; students need activities in the realities of their own schools and communities to gather and to develop their opinions. Awakening the desires of students to have their own place within their schools to gather for conviviality and exchange, the FINAL partnership has fostered greater advocacy for student voice in both Alberta and in Finland. Intriguingly, neither the Finnish nor Alberta educators began with this as an explicit aim of the partnership. Student voice emerged through a participatory and inclusive organizing strategy oriented around the question of what makes a great school for all.



## Soliciting Student Voice: A Multilayered Approach

Students want to believe that educators are on their side and are invested in their success. In this case, student voice was cultivated on many levels. A social justice leader, Jean Stiles, and her creation of a Global Café at Jasper Place High School nurtured student voice. The ATA and the Finnish partners sought out educators with a progressive vision of student participation not only in responding to change but also leading it. Educators in the two-high achieving jurisdictions of Finland and Alberta wanted to have leaders who were willing to push harder and deeper to explore new ways that schools could improve that are not measured on tests like PISA.

One can easily imagine that a different kind of partnership between Finland and Alberta that could have potentially not had included student exchanges. It is striking how rare it is that school improvement efforts solicit student voice. Is it the case that student voice is too unpredictable and ill-informed to shape school improvement strategies? Could it be that students do not have the discipline to participate legitimately in school improvement? These



issues can be formulated as empirical questions. Until we have more data on this subject, FINAL provides a provocative example of an international partnership between two jurisdictions with leaders who wanted something more for their students than their test score results. What that would be was left open-ended as part of a new shared process of information gathering and exchange.

## Conclusion

In the end, educators have to decide: Must we bow to the spirit of the times and follow a philosophy of education focused on human capital formation as the summum bonum of education? Are our students to be understood primarily as knowledge workers who will provide taxpayers with a good return on public investments? Or, is there another way of thinking, in line with that of Kant and Adorno, that views student voice as a primary process and outcome of education for freedom? Educators in many different jurisdictions are seeking to recover a more capacious and humanistic philosophy of education, but find their efforts thwarted time and again. How can we move for-



ward?

One way is to capitalize on any venue that presents itself for deliberation and dialogue about the nature and dynamics of educational change today. These venues do not have to be restricted to schools themselves. They can range from community-based organizations to faith-based institutions to research conferences. The history of social movements (Pallotta, 2002; Shirley, 2011) in educational change indicates that democratic deliberation can occur in a wide variety of settings: these include factory floors, farms, cybercafés, and in beauty parlors or barber shops. The key issue is that organizers of change capitalize upon latent opportunities to find talent, to cultivate it, and to initiate debate and exchange.

After completing a presentation on the role of student voice in the FINAL partnership at ICSEI's annual meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio, in January 2015, a spirited debate ensued. Members of our discussion group hailed from Brazil, Canada, France, Mexico, Scotland, and the US. Notes from the discussion, compiled by Lisa Schalla of the University of Minnesota, reveal that while there was no dissent about the importance of including student voice





in school development work, there was disagreement about the wisdom of restricting a study of student voice to two jurisdictions simply because they had performed well on PISA. Some of the researchers felt that PISA initially had served a purpose but that it increasingly had evolved into a behemoth that crowded out alternative perspectives and narrowed inquiry.

One intriguing subsequent development is that the Albertan educators found that the FINAL partnership has been so generative that they have recently expanded it by creating a new partnership with Norway, a middle-level achiever on the PISA tests. In addition to Alberta, the province of Ontario has joined the incipient Norway-Canada or NORCAN partnership. This new partnership will focus on mathematics education and will also include student representatives. Once again, the idea is that much can be learned through open-ended collaboration and exchange that might not be well documented through PISA or other international large-scale assessments.

The entirety of educational change does not have to be led by policy makers or by expert researchers who traverse the globe while those who are closest to the heart of the action—the teachers and students—wait to receive offi-



cial wisdom from on high. FINAL, and now NORCAN, indicate that at least in some international partnerships, a broader vision of Kant and Adorno's "education for voice" endures. Schools still can be recovered as sites that nurture intellectual freedom and critical inquiry—if we can only find the creativity and courage to restore this dimension of their world-historical missions.



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## About the author

Dr. Dennis Shirley is Professor of Education at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College and Editor-in-Chief of *The Journal of Educational Change*.



His work in education spans from the microlevel of assisting beginning teachers to the macrolevel of designing and guiding research and intervention projects for school districts, states and provinces, and nations. He and Andy Hargreaves are working on \$500,000 grant with Education Northwest to improve rural schools in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. He and Hargreaves also have a \$200,000 grant to conduct research on a school improvement network organized by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education in Canada. Previously, he served on a team for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) studying improvement to lower secondary education in Norway. The findings of much of his international research are presented in two books with Hargreaves titled *The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Educational Change* and *The Global Fourth Way: The Quest for Educational Excellence*.





For six years, Shirley led a teacher inquiry project in Boston that has been published in *The Mindful Teacher*. He has presented his research and led professional development workshops in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Ireland, Germany, Jamaica, Mexico, Norway, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, South Africa, United Kingdom, and Vietnam. He earned his doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He currently is working on a new book entitled, *Achieving with Integrity: Toward Mindful Educational Change*.

