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LEARNER VOICE, PRAXIS FOR DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Learner voice has emerged in literature in the 21st century as a means to inform educational change in both developed and developing countries, including Nigeria. It is a rights-based movement and the focus in this work is to help democratise school practices to foster engagement of the perspectives of learners, as partners with teachers, in decision-making involving the curriculum, policies and practices in the context. Analysis of the concept herein is underpinned by social constructivist epistemologies. Learner voice practice challenges didactic pedagogies prevalent within the Nigerian educational system. Rather, the notion regards the learner as a co-creator of knowledge of classroom programmes and partner in school reforms within the context.*

KEY WORDS: learner voice, democratic, engagement, school, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Learner voice has gained prominence in education and research over the last decade. However, the initiative is still unpopular in local literature, educational debates and discussions in Nigeria. The term *learner* is being used in this literature generically to include a *pupil or student*. *Voice* is defined in terms of *views, opinions, perspectives or what is being said*. The idea of democracy is being conceptualised, in the context of this paper, as *increased participation* of learners in school programmes. Learner voice is used in this paper to refer to an idea that focuses on moving those who work on or on behalf of learners to recognise and actively involve learners to enhance their educational experiences and outcomes. Work on this topic is partly inspired by findings of a doctoral research the author executed involving primary school pupils in a rural district in Nigeria, and partly by the dearth of local literature on the issue in the country.

The concept emerged in international literature such as Flutter & Rudduck (2004), Fielding & Bragg (2003), Rudd, Colligan, Naik (2007) and Fielding(2004, 2008, 2012), and has become a new movement to help democratise school practices in developed and developing countries, including Nigeria in the 21st century. Much of the literature aims to reorient practitioners, policy makers, carers and learners themselves towards learner voice as a strategy to ensure effective participation of learners in school programmes in Nigeria.

Learner voice has a strong statutory backing by the United Nations (UN) (Ewa, 2015). Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the child (UNCRC), in particular, to which Nigeria is a signatory (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development, 2000), inspires the emergence of learner voice. Provisions of the UN's policy aforementioned recognise the capability of the learner to form his or her own views and thus give right to the person to freely express those views in all matters affecting him or her (*cf.* Robinson, 2014). The idea is dependent on the premise that the school has to reflect the democratic structures in society in which the school becomes a

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community of participants engaged in the common endeavour of learning (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

Since then there has been increased international attention to employ learner perspectives to develop educational processes. The concept challenges dominant school practices that silence the views of the learner. It is an advocacy that focuses on redefining the role of the learner in educational change (Bahou, 2011) by assigning legitimacy to the perspectives of the learner so as to foster active participation in schooling and facilitate achievement (*cf.* Cook-Sather, 2006). Anderson & Herr (1994) and Messiou (2013) raise concerns that learners constitute a very significant population in schools, and yet they are often seen, but unheard in contrast to the adults who work there.

Notable learner voice literature, for example, McBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck & Myers (2003), Flutter & Rudduck (2004), Rose & Shevlin (2004), Fielding & Bragg (2003) Fielding (2004, 2008, 2012), Flynn (2014), Robinson (2014), Nelson (2015) and Shirley (2015) indicate the relevance of engaging the views of learners on matters that have (direct) bearings on the performance and welfare of the learner at school (*also see* Ewa, 2015). These sources signal the need to incorporate the perspectives of learners, emphasise their participation and grant them more responsibilities to build partnerships with educators to foster democratic schooling (Ewa, 2015).

Interest on learner voice grew due to the perception that the school engages in an active process that inhibits the opinions of learners via its policies and practices in order to smooth over the role of the practitioner (Fine, 1991). Learners, thus arguably have a limited voice in education (Cook-Sather, 2006) in the context. Perceptions about young people, childhood and learning as documented, for instance, by Kvale (1996), Docherty & Sandelowski (1999), Rose & Shevlin (2004) and Toshalis & Nakkula (2012), affect access to and the significance of learner views both in formulating and evaluating provisions in education in the context. The present work consequently, examines the potentials of learner perspective as a strategy to promote democratic schooling in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The writer draws on the social constructivist theory as documented in the works of Heylighen (1997), English & Halford (1995), Steffe & Gale (1995) and Vrasidas (2000) to provide useful insights about the notion of learner voice. Social constructivism highlights that knowledge does not exist in an objective sense, rather people engage actively to make meanings about the objects and situations that occur around them (Wiske, 1998). It is therefore, assumed 'knowledge does not exist independent of the learner; knowledge is constructed' (Vrasidas, 2000:7). Studies conducted by Piaget (1970), Vygotsky (1978), von Glasersfeld (1989) and Kuhn (1996) have also added to the understanding of this theory. A common thread that binds the argument among these writers is to the effect that constructivism suggests that there is fluidity concerning issues of reality, knowledge and learning. These entities are believed not to have fixed existence; they exist in a continuum and are discoverable. Humans gain consciousness and understanding about things through personal active engagement with the environment in which s/he lives (Ewa, 2015).

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Drawing on the views of Jonassen, (1992a), Cobb (1994) and Philips (1995), Vrasidas (2000:7) outlines some key epistemological assumptions of constructivism: '(1) there is a real world that sets boundaries to what we can experience. However, reality is local and there are multiple realities. (2) The structure of the world is created in the mind through interaction with the world and is based on interpretation. Symbols are products of culture and they are used to construct reality. (3) The mind creates symbols by perceiving and interpreting the world. (4) Human thought is imaginative and develops out of perception, sensory experiences, and social interaction. (5) Meaning is a result of an interpretive process and it depends on the knowers' experiences and understanding'. Learning is regarded to be a largely situation-specific and context-bound activity. Learners probably adapt to their learning community and knowledge as appropriate via interaction with the immediate learning environment (Eggen & Kauchak, 1999; Woolfolk, 2001; McInerney & McInerney, 2002; Liu & Matthews, 2005).

Social constructivists, for example Heylighen (1997), English & Halford (1995) and Steffe & Gale (1995) deny passive learning of concepts by learners. They regard the learning process to result from the active participation of the learner as s/he constructs and interprets situations within his or her social space, inspired by interests and ideas. In this way, it is argued knowledge is constructed through social interaction within communities of practice as proposed by Lave & Wenger (1991). Within the conception is a strong inclination to the interpretivist paradigm in which the learner is considered as a producer of knowledge.

Arguments against the constructivist epistemology is that it favours subjectivism and undermines objectivism (Lakoff, 1987 & Jonassen, 1992a). Emphasis of constructivism on individual or social construction of learning, for instance, is being challenged based on the fact that the universe is a mind-independent existence (Phillips, 1995). Its claim that reality is situated in given environment and also discovery-oriented is relative. The assumption as advanced by constructivist epistemology is problematic as it raises the belief that there is no absolute truth and any truth is the same as the other (Liu & Matthews, 2005). Also, Fox (2001) points out that the stress on learner active engagement means that constructivism ignores the role of passive perception, memorisation, and all the mechanical learning methods in didactic pedagogies (Liu & Matthews, 2005).

More so, Biggs (1998) and Jin & Cortazzi (1998) contend that, although constructivist teaching strategies implies creation of small classroom size to facilitate one-to-one teaching, it nonetheless does not always guarantee teaching effectiveness. The traditional teaching methods, on the other hand, often used in large classroom sizes do not always mean that teaching will not yield positive outcomes in some learners (*cf.* Ewa, 2015). Terhart (2003) has also raised some objections against constructivist philosophy along the same line.

Constructivist formulations have implications for learning and teaching which are in contrast to objectivist strategies (Vrasidas, 2000). Constructivist proponents hold that reality and truth have constructive multiplicity, meaning that available provisions in education need to promote multiple perspectives. This underlines learner voice as an important means to actively engage learners to make meaning regarding the way they are learning at school. Piagetian constructivists argue that

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children, for instance, as learners, always make sense of every issue in the environment and educators have to desist from trying to place knowledge on them (O'Connor, 1998).

Educators, including parents and teachers, are to provide opportunities for learner voice to enable children construct their own understanding of things and take cognizance of the meaning-perspectives of pupils so as to grasp how the interpretations children make constitute the reality of their schooling (Vrasidas, 2000). Such constructivist pedagogy, according to Richardson (2003) is imperative as it is learner-centred, fosters purposeful group work, using different modes of instruction and offers the opportunity for learners to change understandings and the didactic way of accessing knowledge.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The idea of democratisation of school practices in Nigeria via learner perspective is framed, in the present literature, around the concept of *engagement*. Studies by Willms (2003), Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges& Hayek (2007), Trowler (2010) and Taylor & Parsons (2011) conceptualised engagement as the participation of learners in the routine aspects of school such as being prepared to attend classroom lessons, completing required school assignments, taking part in extra-curricular school programmes and sharing their perspectives about these issues (Fielding & Bragg, 2003; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

Engagement is about allowing learners to actively take responsibility in virtually all school activities that matter to them in ways that can give them a sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993b; Willms, 2003), optimise their school experiences, enhance learning outcomes, develop the learners' performances as well as better the reputation of the school (Trowler, 2010). Fletcher (2003) refers to the concept as the involvement of learners in all facets of the educational process purposefully to strengthen their commitment to education, community and democracy.

As such, engagement involves feeling, sense-making and activity (Harper & Quaye, 2009a). To perform activity without feeling engaged is just to be involved or compliant; feeling engaged without taking action is dissociation (Trowler, 2010).Engagement expresses the value school has for learners as partners in improving the school, their acceptance into school management practices and intent of the school to enable them achieve satisfaction in their school experiences (Ewa, 2015).

Research by Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris (2004) identified three dimensions for engaging learners: cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement. According to them, learners who are cognitively engaged would demonstrate more enthusiasm in learning, appreciate challenges and seek to go beyond the requirement. Learners who are emotionally engaged would develop affective reaction such as interest, enjoyment and have a sense of belonging. Those who are behaviourally engaged would express compliance in regular attendance, active involvement and avoid disruptive or anti-social behaviour.

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EXAMINING LEARNER VOICE AS PRAXIS FOR DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLING IN NIGERIA

Education systems of the 19th and 20th centuries did not make provisions for learner view (Crawford, 2005; Porter, 2008 & Gordon, 2010). Learner voice developed as a radical approach to inform educational change to advantage those who are served by it in the present century. It is a rights-based approach to acknowledging learners as possessing the legitimacy and agency to share their perspectives at school and taking active responsibility for what they are learning and how they are learning it (Ewa, 2015).When applied in practice, learner voice includes the most basic level of learners sharing their opinions of problems and potential remedies, allowing the learners to collaborate with practitioners and school administrators to tackle the problems at school and learners taking the lead to seek educational change (Mitra, 2006).

The initiative prioritises the needs of learners, adopting a learner-centred strategy to potentially increase learner participation in school life (MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck, & Myers, 2003; Mitra 2003; Flutter & Ruddock, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2008& Ewa, 2015). Coming as an integral part of schooling it is a potent measure to support learners who are at risk of being excluded or marginalised (Czerniawski, Garlick, Hudson & Peters, 2009; Fielding, 2010).

Writers and researchers who took interest in the subject matter do so following perceived limitations learners, as forgotten partners, experience to engage in school reforms. The consultation of the views of learners is recognition of learners as active partners to improve the conditions of schooling. Partnership as it is being referred to in the learner voice discourse does not portend danger to teacher authority neither does the practice imply competition with the practitioner in classroom air time. It suggests the ability of learners to construct knowledge - each according to experience, ability, interest and situation –independent of adults or educators.

The practice occasions a paradigm shift from the usual instructor-apprentice kind of relationship between the teacher and learner to a collaborative one. Integral to the notion of learner perspective is the process of increased participation to include diverse learners in planning and decision-making in formal settings. Production and sharing of knowledge within the field is conceived as being multidirectional; not unidirectional. Learner voice literature is implicitly opposed to the dictatorial practices associated with the didactic methods of teaching where adults and/or teachers originate ideas, develop knowledge and impart same to the learner. Didactic instructional procedures allow the teacher to impose self over the learner based on the assumption that the learner is an empty vessel that needed to be filled with worthwhile information (Napoli, 2004).

Considerable aspects of educational systems in Nigeria are shaped by cultures, norms and traditions existing within local communities. It is what Hoadley (2010) alluded as cultural patterning of schooling processes. Much of the traditional educational practices confer greater responsibility to adults to orchestrate almost every classroom activity. That is connected to the regard for the teacher as a master of knowledge. To have a voice, nevertheless, means to have a say and being heard rather than being subjected to performing actions following what others have prescribed (Fielding, 2004a). That takes into account the perspectives and ideas of learners, respecting what everyone has to say,

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taking risks, sharing, listening, engaging and working together in partnership (Johnson & Lewis, 2001).

Learner voice practice enables practitioners, school administrators and learners to open up space and minds not just to the sound of the voice but also to the potency of the voice to make a difference at school (Ewa, 2015). In Nigeria learner perspective as a democratic practice is politicised as exemplified by children parliament, student unions and youth forums. It is more about giving legitimacy to the views of learners to perform active role to shape decisions concerning educational provisions (Holdsworth, 2000 & Flynn, 2014).

Engaging the voice of learners in education is one strategy in which educators give knowledge in such a way that places learners not as simply being in passive positions in the learning process. Rather, it means that learners will no longer have to rely on or wait for others to develop ideas, construct meanings and transfer knowledge to them. The Manitoba School Improvement Program provides a typology that describes learner voice along a three-point continuum from passive (information source) to active (participant) to directive (designer) (Lee & Zimmerman, 1999; Mitra, 2006). Michael Fielding's (2001) *students as radical agents of change* is one work that corroborates the typology.

Under the concept of learner voice learners have the opportunity to take active responsibility for what they are learning, how they are learning it and to criticise teacher performance with a view to improving teaching processes (West, 2004). Such a situation means that learners would feel respected, valued; have a sense of belonging and the awareness that they can actually make a difference in their school. Instructional procedures that calls for a-one-directional production and dissemination of information, if left unchecked, can become uninspiring, isolate the learner and ineffective (Shirley, 2015). The right to speak in the classroom therefore has to shift from the pre-allocation of turns by the teacher to self-selection by the learners so that the learners now take control of the management of turn taking of classroom air time to address each other and teachers directly whilst the teacher serves as a moderator (Cadzen, 1988, 2001 & Ewa, 2015).

"If freed from whatever restrains it from coming into being" (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012:745), learner voice can be credible to express learner experience and perception about schooling (Nelson, 2015& Ewa, 2015). Learner perspective does not exist in a vacuum. Expressing a view is much more than the voice of the speaker. The voice has to be listened to and acted upon for it to achieve its intended purpose. According to Fielding (2008:2), it means 'listening purposefully and respectfully in the context of formal schooling', even outside the walls of the school. Educators are to provide the opportunity to be heard and acted upon in a manner consistent with the democratic philosophy (*cf.* Robinson, 2014). The recognition of learner views creates an open-minded space in education to unleash the talents and curiosity of learners in order to explore the spaces of learning to facilitate innovations (*see* Shirley, 2015). It reconceptualises children as a people who have the competence to offer valuable views rather than as those who develop skills and enablement to express an opinion later in adulthood (Tangen 2008; Boorman, Nind & Clarke, 2009 & Ewa, 2015).

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One significant implication of the provision in article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, stated previously, for education is that it "takes the participatory traditions of democracy more seriously" in education (Fielding, 2012:45).It presents a valuable change process where learners become participative citizens, working alongside educators to mobilise knowledge to reform school culture and ethos. As stated in the British Educational Research Journal (2005:535), learner voice

> . . . also implies a sense of working 'on' a problem, . . . where opinions are valued and difference is expected and wrestled with; where power differentials are explicated, critiqued and resisted.

The transition, through learner voice, from one-way traditions of engagement in learning to alternative pedagogies provides the liberty for learners to make judgements about school policies, curriculum, processes and practices virtually without fear or intimidation by dominant others (White, 2008 cited in Fielding, 2012). Work by Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten (2014), *"engaging learners as partners in learning and teaching: a guide for faculty"*, also draws from this idea in relation to increasing participation of learners in the learning process. Through learner voice opportunities, learners can work with peers, teachers, school heads and other stakeholders to co-create the trajectory of reform, thus enabling them to meet individual needs and reinforce their ownership of the change process (Mitra, 2006 & Ewa, 2015). Consequently, learner voice movement is an amelioration of disengagement of learners at school in the context.

Stringent policies directed at sustaining educational standards and teacher accountability tend to be in contrast with the democratic imperatives required to boost learner experience at school and so it is essential to consider how to limit the effects on learner voice. The current movement can serve as one strategy to tackle the differences between the performativity ideology with the democratic principle (British Educational Research Journal, 2005). Where learner voice is being provided for in national education policy it is likely to see the issue being pushed down the priority order, especially in developing countries. Should there be any provisions made for the inclusion or strengthening of learner voice in policy it will therefore be a plus in the education reform agenda of Nigeria.

For the practitioners, however, the assumed challenge to engage learner voice could be whether learners can articulate their thoughts to express their concerns in a credible manner rather than giving their perspectives blandly or sharing them on irrelevant and trivial issues or issues that may be harmful to them (Ewa, 2015).Involvement of learner opinion, especially at the primary school level is problematic. Until recently, there has been reliance on the views of parents, teachers, carers or all of them about the experiences of children in school. The children stay on the periphery of decision-making process in education such that they are seen, but not heard (Rose & Shevlin, 2004). It connects to the paternalistic discourse that reflects the view that children are the property of their parents, and that can make it difficult for the children to regard their views as being separate from that of their parents (Rose & Shevlin, 2004).

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This is also due to the perception that children lacked the verbal skills, conceptual abilities, recall and overall narrative competence to convey their feelings and ideas (Kvale, 1996 & Ewa, 2015). Of specific interest is the accuracy of children's reports and the degree to which they can be positively or negatively influenced by suggestive communication techniques. There is also the argument that children's memories might be 'jumbled up' and not sequential, causal or deductive (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999) and responses from them can make information become less valid.

Researchers such as Deatrick & Faux, (1989), Bearison, (1991) and Thompson & Gustafson (1996) have argued that children are the best sources of information about themselves. By obtaining the views of adults about the experiences of children you shift the focus from seeking information directly from children to seeking information about them, and that can reduce the position of the children to passive participants. Thus, there is a particular need to get inside the unique culture of childhood to understand how the world actually appears to them (Yamamoto, Soliman, Parsons & Davies, 1987).

Children can effectively communicate personal experiences once the capacity for self-evaluative reflection and emotional response (Lewis, 1991) and a sense of agency have begun to develop (Pillemer & White, 1989). The development of the self-concept has significant impact on how autobiographic memories are organized, and it occurs with other cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional changes. Autobiographical memories are personal memories of specific events coded with respect to time and place (Howe, Courage & Peterson, 1994).

Recall of children who are 3 to 6 years old has been shown to be accurate and stable over time (Fivush & Hamond, 1990; Fivush, Hamond, Harsch, Singer & Wolf, 1991; Fivush, 1993; Steward & Steward, 1996). Children's recall improves with age. Older children will have an increased ability to communicate more details of their experiences. Gordon**,** Jens, Hollings & Watson(1994), Gorman (1980) and Herjanic, Herjanic, Brown & Wheatt (1975) have indicated that 7- to 14-year-old children are valid and reliable informants narrating accounts about their school experiences (*also see* Raskin &Yuille, 1989; Jones, 1992; Goodman & Bottoms, 1993; Lamb, 1994; Bull, 1992, 1996***;*** Aldridge & Cameron, 1999).

Regarding children with impairments, particularly those with speech defects, Nathanson & Crank, (2004) assumed they would be less accurate in their recall of events than other children. Contrary to that opinion, Perlman, Ericson, Esses & Isaacs, (1994), Gudjonsson & Clare (1995) and Milne & Bull (2001) stated that pupils with impairments provide accurate testimony and are not more likely to fabricate or distort information as long as they are interviewed appropriately. These authors suggest that, when given the opportunity to provide a free recall of their experiences, children with impairments tend to be more accurate than their responses to specific questions (Ewa, 2015).

Nonetheless, teachers could feel bored and/or overwhelmed in classroom situations where learners, including children, bring diverse talents and queries to the task of teaching (Shirley, 2015). Another apprehension is linked to the concern that providing learners with the opportunity to have a say would enable them to unnecessarily report teacher behaviour and attitudes to the governing council of the school for disciplinary actions (Ewa, 2015). Teachers can consequently feel the temptation to

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silent the learners or limit their voices because they feel threatened not to lose their jobs, power and authority, especially when learner perspectives are accorded equal value as the teacher's (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002).

Finding time and space in the curriculum to engage with learner views could also be problematic. 'There are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where staff and learners meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together' (Fielding, 2004a:309). Learners lack institutional power and are restricted to expression and consultation because the school does not regard them as trusted authorities who have developed the capacity to assist in educational reform (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).Sometimes practitioners feel they do not have the skills to engage learners in discussing, designing and implementing school plans.

Furthermore, the restraint to learner voice in school is a reflection, perhaps, of prevailing gerontocratic practices within the Nigerian context in which opinions of elders are held sacrosanct; respected and valued above the views of young people. There is a belief (or a popular say) within the context that 'words of elders are words of wisdom'. Older people are regarded to have accumulated vast experience and knowledge over time, and can rightly draw on the wealth of these resources at their disposal to inform their perspectives compared to young people. Thus, the opportunity to have a voice on an issue in the context is arguably determined by seniority over interest and initiative. So, in school learners can find a setting where they learn under an authoritarian culture.

It demonstrates a lack of commitment on the part of adults, practitioners and policy makers to democratise the process of decision-making where the views of the learner are also accepted and allowed to generate positive change in educational practices to benefit all. Part of the problem, according to Shirley (2015), may reside in the way educators overlook chances in which learners themselves can evolve skills independent of teachers and even strive to achieve mastery in an area that is in advance of their teachers. Failure to engage deeply with learner views about their learning will significantly reduce the way they control their learning patterns and increase the risk of their disengagement from the experience of school (Rudd, Colligan & Naik, 2007 & Dunleavy, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The notion of learner voice as shown in this literature is considerably new in the Nigerian educational system. Nigeria's educational system supports traditional pedagogies in which the teacher orchestrates virtually all activities at school. Evolution of the concept in the 21st century is to help rethink prevailing cultures that place the learner as forgotten partners in developing and executing school programmes and reforms within the context. Engagement with learner voice provides opportunities to give legitimacy to learners at all levels of education to share their ideas and knowledge about school programmes. It is a strategy that concentrates on democratising school practices intent to ensure increased participation of learners to address educational matters that affect them. The concept is rights based and recognises the ability of the learner to form his or her own opinions independent of dominant others and express same in ways that can enhance the person's experiences of schooling and strengthen his or her commitment to education.

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