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Ruth G Kane and Chris Chimwayange

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Ruth G Kane

University of Ottawa, Canada

Chris Chimwayange

Freyberg High School, New Zealand

Abstract

The *Making Sense of Learning* project began with the premise that for teachers to understand the ways in which their practice influences student learning, they need to invite and listen to students' accounts of their learning experiences. Initiated by classroom teachers, supported by a university researcher, and informed by student voice, this teacher action research involved the empirical-reflective (self-) study by teachers of their practice as interpreted and critiqued by their students and themselves. This article explores how researchers challenge teachers to move beyond taken for granted conceptions of teaching, learning, and roles of students, to engage in learning-centered dialog with their students and through this, transform classroom practice. Supported by the researchers, teachers and students gain a sense of empowerment as they deepen their relationships and negotiate new roles as partners and coresearchers making sense of learning in their classrooms. Teachers and students come to situated understandings of the complexity of teaching and learning that reveal transformative and emancipatory outcomes.

Keywords

Action research, student voice, teacher research

Being a part of this research has been life changing. I've spent time reflecting on my teaching practice, but more so on the students. The overall experience has impacted me on many levels and I know that I will never teach the same, think the same about students and I will stop and listen a lot more to what is being said by my students.

Corresponding author:

Ruth G Kane, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, 145 Jean-Jacques-Lussier, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6N5.

Email: rkane@uottawa.ca

Although challenging and personally revealing, I'd still do it all over again. (Teacher Researcher)

Where it all began

This study has its genesis in secondary teachers seeking the assistance of a university researcher to better understand how their teaching affects student learning. Three teachers from a faith-based secondary school located in rural New Zealand approached a university researcher (RK) for assistance in developing a teacher inquiry that would enable them to understand *if* and *how*, what they were *teaching* in their classrooms was being *learned* by the students. They posed the question: “How do I improve what I am doing in my classroom?” The teachers were poised to engage in collaborative action research; “research undertaken by practitioners in order that they may improve their practices” (Corey, 1953, p. 141). They hoped to enlist the researcher’s support in cycles of classroom observation, feedback, and reflection, leading to coplanning revised classroom practice. In keeping with the tenants of action research, they invited the researcher to work *with* practitioners in the context of practice—their classrooms (Bradbury, 2010).

In response, the researcher asked the teachers to look beyond a researcher/practitioner collaboration; arguing that for the teachers to understand the ways in which their practice influences student learning, they needed to invite and listen to students’ accounts of their learning experiences. The researcher disrupted the teachers’ conceptions of students as learners in the classroom and she challenged them to imagine a situated professional inquiry that engages students as coresearchers of teaching and learning. The *Making Sense of Learning* (MSL) project draws on the intersecting theories and practices of action research, student voice, and collaborative self-study of teaching. Initiated by teachers, supported by researchers, and informed by student voice, this project brings teacher inquiry and student voice into direct dialog and reveals transformative and emancipatory outcomes for teachers and students.

Action research and teacher professional development

Action research is not a new approach to examining and improving teaching practice. In the early 1900s, John Dewey’s work at the Chicago Lab School included those directly involved in education in the research process thereby challenging the orthodoxy of scientific research through initiating research in action with practitioners. The term action research is most often attributed to Kurt Lewin (1946) and his studies of the degree to which workers could contribute to improvement of their working environment. Corey (1953) used action research as a corner stone of the “teacher researcher” movement arguing that teachers working in groups could engage in professional development relevant to their own classrooms and school contexts. Participatory action research (PAR) brought a critical gaze to action

research as research oriented to social transformation building on Freirean notions of “conscientization” and “cultural action for freedom” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Freire, 1972). While action research has been adopted across a range of disciplines as an approach that empowers practitioners to generate knowledge about and improve the contexts within which they work, most relevant to this paper is the importance of action research by and with teachers. Action research promotes a “dialectical movement which goes from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to new action” (Freire, 1972, p. 31), thereby enabling teachers to situate research within their own evolving classroom practice.

Action research has been utilized in teacher education as a way of supporting preservice teachers to develop an inquiry stance (e.g., McQuillan, Welch, & Barnatt, 2012; Volk, 2009), as an embedded form of professional development with beginning teachers (e.g., Ado, 2013; Kardos & Johnson, 2007), and widely as an approach to embedded teacher professional development (e.g., Judah & Richardson, 2006; Koutselini, 2008; Ravitch & Wirth, 2007). Over recent decades, the action research paradigm has become an umbrella term that represents a “family” of practices that share a commitment to inquiry that is: situated within contexts of practice; enacts a commitment to participation with practitioners; leads to knowledge generation; and contributes to the empowerment of participants (Bradbury-Huang, 2010; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Contrary to qualitative research which can be research *about*, *on*, or *for* practice, action research is research conducted *with* practitioners embodying a democratic principle that those who are “affected by the research and action are not acted upon” (O’Leary, 2010, p. 149). With this principle in mind, the MSL project sought to extend beyond researchers working *with* teachers to include students as key “practitioners” who would be most affected by any changes in teaching practice and therefore should be afforded a voice in such change.

Student voice

Over 20 years have passed since Delpit (1988) suggested that “the teacher cannot be the only expert in the classroom” (p. 288) and Fullan (1991) asked “What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?” (p. 170). Moreover, for over two decades, we have witnessed a growing body of research demonstrating the importance of attending to student voice when seeking to understand or to improve participation, teaching, and learning in schools (e.g., Cook-Sather, 2006, 2007; Daws, 2005; Fielding, 2004; Lodge, 2005; Mitra, 2003; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, 2004). This research demonstrates that students have something worthwhile to say about learning and can articulate this in ways that convey meaning and authority for teachers who are open to listening (e.g., Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding, 2001). Furthermore, Rudduck and Demetriou (2003) and Rudduck (2006, 2007) argue that for teachers to develop new ways of supporting student learning, they must gain access to student perspectives on learning and teaching and establish genuine partnerships with young people. Building on this research and encouraged by the rise in “action, participatory and activist-based

research designs” (Thiessen, 2007), the MSL project brings together a university researcher and six¹ teachers in an action research inquiry *on* and *in* their own practice through listening to students’ voices on teaching and learning.

The terms “student voice” and “pupil voice” appear to be used interchangeably in much of the literature (for commentary, see Cook-Sather, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). In this study, we choose to use the term “student voice,” as it is most commonly used when referring to young people in secondary education. We also acknowledge the ambiguity with the use of the word “voice,” which implies there is one, homogeneous voice rather than multiple voices (e.g., Thomson, 2011). We look to the work of others and concur that student voice goes beyond the actual spoken or written word of students to encompass “the many ways in which pupils choose to express their feelings or views about any aspect of their school or college experience” (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p. 6). While others have utilized images (Burke, 2007; Lodge, 2006; Piper & Frankham, 2007; Thomson & Guynter, 2007), drama (Gallagher & Lortie, 2007), or social media such as Twitter (Waller, 2011) as representations of student voice, the MSL project draws on secondary students’ spoken and written reflections of their experiences of teaching and learning.

The MSL project

After a series of meetings to explore how the researcher could work with the teachers to achieve their goals, an application for funding to the New Zealand Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) was successful enabling the appointment of a field researcher.² The six participating teachers had a range of teaching experience (2–15 years) and subject areas (chemistry, English, geography, mathematics, physics, and religion). Each teacher nominated a class within which to locate his/her inquiry conducted over six months across two school terms.

Establishing roles, relationships, and context for teacher research

Time was dedicated in the initial weeks to build relationships and establish roles among the teachers and researchers. Workshops facilitated by the university researcher allowed us to share ideas around how best to examine teaching and learning within the teachers’ classrooms. The idea of talking to students about teaching and learning encountered some resistance as teachers were hesitant to vest such authority in their students; however, step by step this resistance was met by gentle (but persistent) persuasion by the researcher for teachers to set aside their fears and consider what insights the students could bring. We discussed conditions for authentic student involvement including: openness, transparency of purpose, and ethical process; ensuring the safety of students and teachers; providing a space and time for dialog; and ensuring flexibility (Kane et al., 2005), all of which contributed to countering the teachers’ resistance.

The university researcher and field researcher visited each of the nominated classes on two occasions to familiarize students with the study, invite their participation, and respond to any questions. After securing consent from all students, each class was asked to provide a focus group of four students who they felt represented the range of students in their class in terms of gender, learning ability, and interest in the subject. Students determined whom they wanted in the focus groups and submitted names to the researcher (the identity of focus group members was kept confidential). All students completed an initial survey³ which elicited their conceptions of learning and included a number of open-ended questions asking the respondents to identify what they perceived to support and/or constrain learning in the classroom. Initial interviews with elected focus groups provided students with opportunities to talk further about learning and to describe ways in which they understood and experienced learning within the classroom.⁴ Similar surveys were completed by the teachers followed by individual interviews exploring their conceptions of learning and how to support student learning.

Data from surveys and transcripts of initial interviews (with both teachers and students) were shared with teachers in preparation for workshops focused on exploring: What is learning and how is it best supported in my classroom? Facilitated by the university researcher, the workshops provoked discussion on the different ways that learning was understood by the students and the teachers. Teacher researchers were able to pause and consider ways in which their classroom practice was coherent with how students wished to be supported in their learning. These early workshops established a pattern of biweekly meetings which allowed for ongoing “reflexive conversation of practice” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994) as teachers were able to “inquire face to face with others into issues of mutual concern and engage with others productively” (Bradbury & Reason, 2003, p.159).

In week 4, the field researcher began weekly cycles of filming one class each week over eight to 10⁵ weeks of each teacher with the recordings being used subsequently in stimulated recall (SR) interviews with focus groups of students and, separately, with individual teachers. SR interviews, typically conducted by the field researcher on the day of filming, were recorded and transcribed. In the SR interviews, students and teachers were invited to stop the video at any time and explain what was happening and what they were thinking (in situ and, on reflection, while viewing the video). They were invited to talk to the classroom interaction playing out on the screen. The field researcher used probing questions to assist students and teachers to go beyond merely retelling or describing observable behavior to reveal their in-class thinking and effects on engagement and learning enabling both students and teachers to become researchers of their own practice.

Listening to students’ voices to make sense of learning

The field researcher was situated within the school full time and worked weekly with each teacher, recording a class and then conducting teacher and student focus group SR interviews. During the teacher SR interview, the field researcher shared

anecdotes from the SR student focus group thereby enabling teachers to reflect on the students' experiences and understandings of learning within the context of their own intentions for that class. Each week teacher researchers were provided with transcripts of student focus group and their own interviews to review in preparation for workshops every two weeks. The transcripts constituted a safe way of relaying student voices to the teachers with the researcher and field researcher serving as interpreters of student voices. During meetings, we would collectively view excerpts from video recordings or use excerpts from the student or teacher SR transcripts to provoke reflection on and in practice. The lead researcher served as a mentor encouraging collective analysis of the SR transcripts, coinquiry into the meaning conveyed through student voices, and discussion of next steps. The cycles of filming, SR interviews, and collaborative analysis and reflection continued throughout the school term as collaborative teacher self-study on and in (one's own) action.

In practice, while the teacher researchers contributed to discussion on each other's transcripts, the weekly cycles of classroom observation (filming) and SR interviews meant they gave greatest attention to the messages that lay within the transcripts from their own students. In keeping with the original goal of the research project, the teachers were motivated to discover if what they were doing in their classroom was promoting student learning and if not, to consider alternative approaches informed by the voices of their students. Each week, in subsequent classes, teachers would acknowledge what they were hearing from students, what they were learning about their own teaching, and how they intended to respond in terms of classroom practice. As students began to experience changes in the teachers practice, they became more confident in their role as critical informants of teaching and learning and took a more active role in the analysis. Students shared, reviewed, and discussed transcripts of the SR interviews with the researchers. They began to identify recurring patterns in their classrooms through analysis of their own and each other's transcripts.

Researchers, teachers, and students contributed the analysis and interpretation of findings in the final weeks of the project as we prepared a collaborative presentation for a national conference (Kane et al., 2004). The following section draws on this collaborative analysis and on the researcher's reflections to report disruptions in classroom roles, relationships, and practice and to discuss what was learned by teachers, students, and researchers.

Findings: Disruptions in classroom roles and relationships leading to transformations in practice

The origin of this study lies in a group of secondary teachers asking a university researcher "How do I improve what I am doing in my classroom?" As researchers we now take pause to reflect on what was learned from the *MSL project*⁶ and what contribution this study, set in one secondary school in New Zealand, can offer to our understanding of practitioner research of teaching and learning. Through the

course of the study, communication among participants evolves and the respective roles of the researchers, teacher researchers and students are disrupted as relationships within and outside of the classrooms shift. *Making sense of learning* in these teachers' classrooms becomes the shared responsibility of teachers and students and the roles of the university researchers, so essential to the initial stages of the project, diminish. We first discuss critical emergence of dialog among teachers and students and then what teachers, students, and researchers learned about researching learning and teaching.

Bringing teachers and students into direct dialog

At the outset of this study, communication between teachers and students was generally respectful, at times light hearted, but largely limited to classroom questions, content explanations, and questions as to the students' well-being. Initial surveys and focus groups revealed that opportunities for student voice were interpreted by students within a context of power and control: "We don't have a voice because teachers overrule." Students suggested that if teachers listened more attentively to students it might help student learning, yet there was no evidence of teachers and students talking explicitly about learning or how students learned. While initially sceptical that their "voices" would be taken seriously, students were willing to participate, and as one student suggested, "maybe if the teachers actually listened to us, they could have a much deeper understanding of what we are going through in the school."

Prior to this study, on the whole teachers had not given much thought to privileging student voice in terms of learning about teaching, nor had they initiated discussions on learning with their classes. While teachers agreed to look to their students as a way of examining their own practice, the reality of listening to students' feedback on their lessons was initially somewhat threatening to some. One teacher expressed "fear of what students would say about me" and others were reluctant to accept that the students' feedback was worthy of serious consideration.

I know we talked about students giving us feedback but do they really know anything about the technicalities of teaching – I mean, you [researcher] would be better placed to tell me what you thought of the lesson and where there are things to improve.

Contrary to their initial commitment to student voice, there was resistance to accepting students as authorities on teaching. Teachers expressed nervous, at times dismissive comments about the insights from students and they looked to the researchers for feedback on their teaching practice. Countering this resistance, the lead researcher refused to take the position of "authority on teaching," encouraging teachers to take risks she directed them back to examining the students' transcripts as thoughtful accounts of how teaching was being experienced within their class. She drew attention to elements in the transcripts that reflected

teachers' focus on content-driven practice and prevented them from "seeing" students as something other than "learners."

I had to come to grips with that, to know that something that would be valuable for me would be to hear what my students actually felt, what they thought about the process through which I taught them, the process in which they actually participated in the class.

The lead researcher took the role of facilitator in these reflexive discussions as she compelled teachers to not turn away from the process, but to allow themselves to be drawn in by what they could learn from students. She challenged the teachers to find answers to questions: "How is my teaching affecting students?" "Where is the learning?" "Who am I teaching for?" Taking up the challenge, the teachers listened to how their teaching was being experienced by students and opened their minds to alternative ways of understanding classroom practice.

Communication between students and teachers was supported initially through the research process as the researchers "translated" the students' voices to the teachers through SR transcripts and anecdotes. Teachers communicated back to students what they were learning about teaching and students witnessed the impact of their own voices in the teachers' transformed teaching practice. As students witnessed their own teachers' willingness to be influenced by their feedback (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007), they became increasingly forthcoming and moved beyond describing what was happening in the classroom to talking about the impact that teaching was having on their learning. The student SR held classroom practice as the object of student observation and reflection and their transcripts revealed increasingly rich interpretations of teaching and learning.

We can talk about how we learn and how she teaches us. We can tell her that if you do this we understand better than the way you currently do it. We can tell her what, why and when she does something that is helpful to us. . . . We understand each other better, get along well and we feel free to tell her if we think that she might be able to do something better and hopefully [she feels] the same way with us.

The research process generated a shifting context where both teachers and students were engaged in reflection *on* and *in* practice leading to "cycles of respectful dialog" initially channelled through the researchers. With growing confidence, however, the dialog moved into the classroom as teachers created spaces for learning-centered conversations during class. For less vocal students, teachers adopted a system of fast feedback using "tickets out of class" (Russell, 2006) where students could record feedback and questions anonymously.

They just drop their ideas and feedback in the box as they walk out . . . those cards provide me with evidence of how they are experiencing my teaching. The cards tell me if they [the students] understand what I thought I was teaching them. That is what

I realise now and it is so simple – a little 3 × 5 card – and if they don't get it, if they are not learning, then I need to know that and I need to do something about it.

The researchers facilitated communication between the students and teachers, but we were not responsible for the emerging dialog—this, the teachers and students created and sustained within their classrooms. The research enabled the teachers to experience teaching as praxis, as a dialectical relationship between teacher and student, and environment and self, bringing teachers to new understandings of classroom experience (Koutselini, 2008). Through a growing commitment to learning-centered dialog, both teachers and students found a sense of empowerment as they negotiated new ways of acting in the classroom.

What teachers learned—Reframing classroom practice as partnership

The participating teachers demonstrated courage allowing their teaching and the thinking underlying their teaching to be scrutinized by their peers, researchers, and students over multiple weeks. All six teacher researchers report being affected by this experience in ways that disrupted their “default” style of teaching and challenged understandings of the respective roles of students and teachers.

I've spent a fair bit of time this year not only critiquing myself but actually coming to accept the critique of the students and listening to and dialoguing with the students. You always heard them, but you didn't necessarily listen. But when you have it on paper in front of you, and when it's on video going in front of you, you can't ignore it, you see yourself in a slightly different light.

Teachers not only had opportunities for reflection *on* action but, through the SR interviews, they were able to engage in delayed reflection *in* action (Schön, 1987) and the novel dynamic of bringing students' voices into the teachers' research pushed them to question taken for granted conceptions about students, teaching, and learning. Reflexive discussions facilitated by the researcher called on teachers to view their teaching practice from multiple (often contradictory) perspectives and to consider carefully what meaning they were finding in their own and the students' reflections. For some teachers, it was a revelation that the students who were in the classroom with them each day, were well positioned to provide informed comment on teaching practice.

Through student feedback I have come to see that the things I have been doing as a teacher for years and years weren't suiting their needs. Students might have been trying to tell me this forever but I never heard them, or never thought of them as people who could advise me on teaching, who could help me improve. But it all makes sense – we are in the classroom together and the only ones who can let me know how my teaching helps them to learn are the students.

Through listening to student voices, teachers began to break through old ways of knowing and counter their implicit beliefs that students could not be authorities on teaching and learning. The action research process did not resolve teaching problems or provide ready answers; rather it provided a process through which teachers constructed interpretative knowledge. Teachers enhanced their own awareness of teaching and learning which lead to new understandings of teaching practice and students' roles within their classrooms.

The students' voices and the emerging dialog served as a catalyst for teachers to negotiate new relationships with students and to reframe their own practice. As teachers created spaces for conversations on learning, they became "more aware of how they [students] actually learn" which caused them to rethink how students are positioned and to "view them more as partners in the classroom."

Since we have been in this research together they can talk to me about learning and I can learn a lot from them about my teaching. But I need to make it happen, I need to create the spaces within my class for conversations on learning.... I don't think, before the research, I ever talked to any of my students about learning as such. In fact I am not sure we talked about it much as teachers either.

There evolved a "dialogic reflective model of professionalism, forged in alliance with students in the first instance" (Wisby, 2011, p. 41) as teachers explored alternative approaches to teaching in partnership with students.

Teachers shifted their teaching focus from teaching content to how they could promote student engagement in learning. Classroom conversations which previously focused on teacher questioning or checking for student understanding came to resemble a more dialogical model of student participation (Fielding, 2004) with teachers actively listening. Where previously teachers would independently plan and introduce new units of work to students, teachers saw an opportunity to enlist student collaboration in deciding how to approach new areas of study. Teachers shared formal curriculum documents with students and discussed learning objectives and how best to achieve them. In the passage below from a science teacher researcher, we see how engaging students as partners in learning led to new ways of planning and teaching within his classroom that he would not have come to alone.

I've begun to actually ask my kids how they would like to approach new topics. We look at the curriculum documents together and work out what is expected but instead of me planning it all the students discuss it and come up with their own ideas and some of them are great. Sometimes I have to unpack some of the language for them but once they have a sense of what the documents demand, they talk in groups about what they have to learn, how they want to learn it and how they can demonstrate they've learned. Then we come back together as a class, explore what resources we might need, map out the coming weeks and post it up on the wall and away we go. The plan

stays on the wall where we can all refer to it as we move through the unit – sometimes we chop and change as we go along, sometimes we need more time - but the cool thing is that we are doing it together. And strange as it may seem the students are super serious about holding us accountable so they spontaneously take on roles as peer tutor. It has shifted everything around, I'm not the only teacher in the classroom anymore, it's a bit strange at first and we still have issues from time to time but then we have our dialogue to fall back on. We call 'time out' and talk about what is happening – we have key questions – What is the learning goal here? How can we get there? What do you [students] need from me [teacher] to get there? And somehow it all works.

In the scenario above, the teacher realized that his leadership within the classroom did not depend on him being the sole authority, making all the decisions. Contrary to initial fears concerning the possible erosion of a teacher's authority in the classroom, listening to the students' voices enhanced his practice and his understanding of how to support student learning. Through trusting the students (and indeed the students trusting him), he was able develop deeper relationships with his students which in turn resulted in reframing the ways in which teaching and learning was enacted within his classroom (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Rudduck, 2007). Through letting go some of his authority, the teacher enabled increased student participation and commitment as he and the students renegotiated the hierarchical structure of teacher and learner "to build new knowledge and solve problems working jointly" (Prieto, 2001, p. 89).

Within all six teachers' classrooms, differentiation of power remains a reality and as Pedder and McIntyre (2006) caution "[h]owever good pupils' ideas might be, it is the teachers' responsiveness to them that is ultimately important" (p.145). The teachers in the MSL project all adopted new practices within their classrooms as a consequence of listening to student voices; they transformed their teaching practice to varying degrees. There evolved a willingness on the part of the teachers to see students as partners and there exists a "growing confidence between teachers and pupils that they are both deriving benefits in the classroom" (Cook-Sather, 2009; Pedder & McIntyre, 2006). Through preserving classroom time for dialog about teaching and learning, teachers share ownership of classroom practice with their students with a focus on *who* they are teaching and *how* their teaching is supporting learning.

What students learned—Becoming researchers of learning

From the outset, students were aware that teachers were seeking their collaboration in an effort to enhance teaching and learning in their classrooms. Students acknowledged that they had never before been asked to talk about how they learned and so they initially were a little wary; unsure whether anything they might say could possibly bring about change in their classrooms. The focus group SR interviews with the field researcher provided a safe space and gave

them opportunities to develop a way of speaking about teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, 2002) and their role in it. Students acknowledged that prior to participating in the research, they saw the classroom as a space where the teacher taught and, all going well, they, the students learned. When viewing the video recording, they could articulate quite clearly situations in class where they did not learn—"I'm just sitting there waiting for him to get it over with because I didn't understand anything that was going on because he was flying through it so quickly I never got a chance to even begin to understand what he was doing." When learning did not happen they could identify what they perceived the teacher was doing wrong—going too fast, not explaining, not giving examples—but they did not see themselves as having a role in challenging the way they were taught. Rather, they found alternative pathways to learning through their peers—"I wait until after class and have a friend explain it to me and yeah, it like clicks and I get it"; in general, students saw their role as passive, sitting and waiting for teaching to make learning happen.

When we reflect on what was learned by the student researchers through participation in the MSL project, we can identify two key areas. First, students learned that they could influence the ways in which they were taught; they came to trust that their voices mattered.

Having a voice in chemistry class is really different, and it's helpful because now you don't feel scared to tell her [teacher] 'I can't, I just don't get you', and now, instead of her thinking I'm just a pain, she stops, listens and tries explaining it a different way or asks one of the other kids to explain it.

Students' voices were "incorporated into action taken by others" (Holdsworth, 2000, p. 358) and through cycles of respectful dialog teachers and students became "inquiry partners" (Anderson et al., 1994). Students became interrogators of teaching practice, identifying ways in which teachers' pedagogical practices supported or stymied their learning and in so doing began to coconstruct teaching practice with their teachers.

Second, students gained new understandings of the complexity of teaching and learning and a growing awareness of their own roles as active learners rather than passive recipients. In recognizing the power of their voices to affect teaching practice, the students acknowledged teaching and learning as a shared responsibility: "because now we're saying things to Mr. X and he's trying to work on them, and then you have more responsibility to learn because you've asked him to change." Through watching their own action in the video, they came to understand that they have a role in learning: "I can see in the video how I respond to the teacher and when I am with it or not and I can see where I missed stuff and why." Students became researchers, examining their own actions as they inquired into ways in which *their* learning was sustained and/or constrained in the classroom.

Now I can see where I fit in this and if I am not learning, if I am slack, if I just can't be bothered one day I can't go saying it is the teacher's fault because I am part of this and

I can tell him if I don't get it. I have to tell him when I can't work it out – or how else is he gonna know?

Through their recall of in-class thinking and action, students demonstrated capacity for critical reflection *on* and *in* learning practice. Teaching was no longer something done to them and responsibility for learning was no longer vested only in the teacher's practice. Students recognized that learning required something more from them; they became active learning practitioners. For many, this new ownership of the learning process was a catalyst for changes in their own classroom practice and engagement.

I used to think I was really bad in math cause I couldn't understand it, I thought he was a useless teacher. But with this research I can see what I am doing in class and I can see what I have to do, it's not just him [teacher] – I need to really try and understand instead of just hoping it's gonna make sense. I am really into it now, like I go to class saying in my head I gotta listen and ask questions and it works, I can make it happen.

The student above demonstrates that empowerment and emancipation were experienced by students alongside of their teachers. No one instructed the student to be more engaged or more attentive (although no doubt teachers had implored him to be so many times), rather his involvement as a coresearcher of teaching and learning had caused him to reflect on his own behavior in the class and awoken in him an growing sense of responsibility and agency in the learning process.

What researchers learned about researching teaching and learning

Typically, when researchers conduct research projects they seek to understand a concept or practice more deeply, to generate knowledge or theory through a systematic empirical inquiry. The MSL project presented an opportunity for us to explore *with* teachers and students whether teaching practice could be enhanced through consulting students. Through the use of SR, we found ways of assisting students to make explicit how they experienced teaching and learning in the classroom (Rudduck, 2006). We worked with teachers as they made sense of the students' voices. We challenged them to consider alternative ways of thinking about teaching and we supported them in reframing their practice.

Researchers, teachers, and students formed partnerships that shifted as the MSL project progressed. As researchers we were continually negotiating between roles as "insider and outsider, facilitator and collaborator, participant and observer" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). As researchers we were welcomed inside the school and were initially positioned by both teachers and students as experts. We partnered with students as they told us what was "wrong" in the classroom and they looked to us to "fix" their teachers. We worked in partnership with teachers as they examined their intentions and practice and looked to us for

advice on improving their teaching. However, our commitment to teacher action research lead us to resist the mantle of expert as we learned to prompt, to encourage, and to challenge teachers to reach beyond their initial comfort levels to engage with student voice. The field researcher due in part to her youth and her open personality encouraged and reassured the students so that they were willing to use their voices. As the research progressed, we served more of a facilitator role, enabling communication through SR transcripts and creating opportunities for teachers and students to work in partnership and learn from each other's expertise, not ours.

As a teacher-initiated inquiry, the MSL project was coherent with the epistemological underpinnings of action research that call for participation to be voluntary and collaborative. As researchers we learned that when researching teaching and learning, it is critical to create spaces and processes through which those most involved in teaching and learning are given voice and provided with opportunities to engage with the voices of each other. It was through creating spaces and safe channels for dialog that the researcher facilitated this embedded teacher professional development with emancipatory outcomes for both teachers and students. The students and teachers were located inside the research process "as producers of knowledge about teaching and learning, not as the receivers of the research" (Oliver, 2005, p.1). Students were located "inside" as experts on their own learning and classroom practice and teachers were located "inside" as researchers of their own practice with students. Together, they generated knowledge on teaching and learning (Bradbury-Huang, 2010). As researchers, we learned to step back to the fringes to listen, to challenge, to question, to support and eventually, to step outside the process as teachers and students negotiated new partnerships through respectful dialog that promised to be sustainable beyond the research process.

Conclusion

The MSL project draws on the intersecting theories and practices of action research, student voice, and collaborative self-study of teaching. Findings demonstrate that student voice can support teachers in reframing classroom practice so that students are active as "agents in the process of transformative learning" (Fielding, 1999, p. 22). When learning is held as central to the inquiry, as is the case in this study, all participants move between the roles of learners and teachers. At different times, teachers are researchers, learners, and teachers of their students. Students are learners, researchers, and teachers informing teacher practice learning alongside teachers and researchers (Cook-Sather, 2002). Researchers are at times researchers, facilitators, mentors, and ultimately also learners. This study confirms that "if teachers and students learn about what learning is and how it happens they understand a greater range of learning possibilities and approaches and improve their learning and teaching" (Watkins, Carnell, Lodge, Wagner, & Whalley, 2004, p. 1). The MSL project brought teacher inquiry through action research into direct dialog with student voice to explore the question posed by Fullan "what would

happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?" (1991, p. 170). This teacher/student research on and in (one's own) action was more than, and different to, action; more than, but encompassed, reflection; and more than, but encompassed teaching and learning (Ham & Kane, 2004). This research relied on the initial support of researchers who created the conditions for collaborative inquiry into teaching and learning through continually refocusing the teachers' inquiry on the meaning that could be made through listening to student voice. We held ourselves to the democratic principle earlier noted that those who are "affected by the research and action are not acted upon" (O'Leary, 2010) and we took care to serve as a mirror to teachers and students, helping them see themselves in the data. Partnering with researchers challenged teachers to move their thinking and practices beyond taken for granted assumptions and comfortable, well-tested routines to transform their practice. Through enlisting student voices in the action research process teachers engaged in what Rath (2002, 154) identifies as "action research as border crossing" as together with students they generated "new discourses of personal meaning-making, responsibility, and agency." Supported by the researchers, teachers and students gain a sense of empowerment and come to more situated understandings of the complexity of teaching and learning that reveal personally relevant transformative and emancipatory outcomes.

Postscript

At the conclusion of the formal research study, students tested the boundaries of their new found agency and established the "Student Voice for Learning Group." At staff meetings, they reported on what they as students had learned from the research and suggested ways in which all teachers within the school could incorporate student voice through creating spaces in their lessons for dialog with students that focused on learning. In addition, students and teachers were supported by the school community to participate in a national conference on educational research (Kane et al., 2004). The researcher introduced the conference session but it was the teachers and students who led the panel on *Making Sense of Learning at Secondary School* as "joint authors" (Fielding, 2011, p.12) in reporting the ways in which their participation in the project had transformed their experiences as teachers and learners.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. Of the original nine, six teachers worked alongside the researchers for the two school terms. Three of the teachers had to withdraw after the first term for different reasons.
2. The funding also allowed the project extend to a further two schools in the following year; however, this paper reports findings related to the initial school only.
3. Copy of the survey in Appendix 1.
4. Copy of interview protocol in Appendix 2.
5. The field researcher staggered the commencement of video recordings so that each participating teacher had a day each week over 8–10 week period dedicated to the research within their nominated class.
6. This paper is written by the lead researcher (RK) with the assistance of a graduate student who joined the project after it was extended to additional schools.

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Author biographies

Ruth G Kane is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa. She has worked in Teacher Education in New Zealand and Australia before moving to Canada in 2006. Her research interests focus on Teacher Education, beginning teacher induction, urban education and student voice in teaching and learning.

Chris Chimwayange completed his PhD focused on girls’ decision processes for participation in design and technology subjects in Zimbabwe’s secondary schools with Massey University in New Zealand. He has taught in colleges in Zimbabwe and New Zealand. His research interests include interventions that optimize students learning in technology education, curriculum integration and student voice issues in learning.

Appendix I



Making Sense of Learning

Student Questionnaire

Thank-you for agreeing to be part of this project and share your thoughts and ideas about learning in secondary school.

Sometimes teachers and researchers think they know how students are thinking, and how students learn best. Sometimes what we think can be quite different from what the students actually think. This is a chance for you to tell us how it is from your point of view. Your [subject] teacher is interested in finding out how [his/her] teaching helps or hinders your learning in [his/her] classes.

We believe that for teachers and researchers to be able to understand and improve student learning, we need to ask for and listen to the views and ideas of secondary students. That is what this project seeks to do - give you an opportunity to tell us what learning in secondary school is like for you, and to suggest some ideas to improve it.

This questionnaire is the first step. It will be used as the basis for a focus group interview with Nikki Maw, a Massey University researcher, at a later date. When answering the following questions we ask you to think specifically about the teacher who has asked you to participated and what it is like for you learning in his/her classroom.

We appreciate your time, your ideas and your commitment.

About You

Name:	
School:	
Teachers name:	
Class/subject:	

1. Are you: *(Please tick one box)* Male ☐ Female ☐
2. Are you *(Please circle)*
Y9 Y10 Y11 Y12 Y13
2. What school subject do you think you are BEST at? _____
3. What school subject do you think you are WORST at? _____

4. The Nature of Learning

Below are some statements often made about learning. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement (*Please tick one answer on each line*)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a) I like learning	☐	☐	☐	☐
b) I have to think hard to do my work	☐	☐	☐	☐
c) Learning is being able to use the information I've got	☐	☐	☐	☐
d) Having targets helps me improve my learning	☐	☐	☐	☐
e) Learning is about getting more facts and information	☐	☐	☐	☐
f) Working in groups helps me to learn better	☐	☐	☐	☐
g) Other students' bad behaviour disturbs my learning	☐	☐	☐	☐
h) It is up to me to do my best, I am in control of my learning	☐	☐	☐	☐
i) I think about how I learn	☐	☐	☐	☐
j) Learning is about seeing things a different way	☐	☐	☐	☐
k) My work is too easy for me	☐	☐	☐	☐
l) Learning is about making sure I remember things well	☐	☐	☐	☐
m) Learning is fun	☐	☐	☐	☐
n) I like to be clear about what I am learning	☐	☐	☐	☐
o) Learning is about developing as a person	☐	☐	☐	☐
p) I like work that challenges me	☐	☐	☐	☐
q) Assessing my own work helps me learn better	☐	☐	☐	☐
r) Learning is about understanding new material for myself	☐	☐	☐	☐
o) It helps if we review what we have learned at the end of the lesson	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. The role of Your Teacher

Below are some statements often made about teachers. Thinking of your teacher, indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement. (Please tick one answer on each line)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My teacher...				
a) explains things clearly	☐	☐	☐	☐
b) encourages me to do my best work	☐	☐	☐	☐
c) treats me fairly in class	☐	☐	☐	☐
d) thinks my work is good	☐	☐	☐	☐
e) tells me how I can improve my work	☐	☐	☐	☐
f) encourages me to think for myself	☐	☐	☐	☐
g) listens to what I say	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My Teacher....				
h) helps me to understand my work	☐	☐	☐	☐
i) praises me when I have worked hard	☐	☐	☐	☐
j) encourages me to think about learning	☐	☐	☐	☐
k) tells me how I am getting on with my work	☐	☐	☐	☐
l) helps me understand how I learn best	☐	☐	☐	☐
n) helps me to set targets for my work	☐	☐	☐	☐
o) tells me I can do well	☐	☐	☐	☐
p) cares about what I think	☐	☐	☐	☐
q) makes learning fun	☐	☐	☐	☐

6. In this question we are interested to know what activities in class YOU think help you to learn and which of these activities you think the teacher believes are helpful to your learning. The left –hand column is where you record what **YOU** think helps you to learn. The right-hand column is where you record what **You think the TEACHER thinks** helps you to learn. (*Please tick twice on each line, once on the left and once on the right*)

I think that that I					The teacher thinks that I			
Learn a lot	Learn quite a lot	Learn a little	Learn nothing		Learn a lot	Learn quite a lot	Learn a little	Learn nothing
				When I				
☐	☐	☐	☐	Listen to the teacher talk	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Do experiments	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Work on the computer	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Watch a video	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Listen to a tape	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Act something out or do a role-play	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Take notes while the teacher talks	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Take notes from a book or worksheet	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Make things (like models)	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Work on my own	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Work in pairs	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Work in groups	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	Take notes from the board	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	We have class discussions	☐	☐	☐	☐

7. Please complete the following sentences in the spaces provided

In my [subject] class I wish my teacher would...

In my [subject] class I wish my teacher wouldn't...

In my [subject] class it would be great if...

In my [subject] class why do we have to do...

In my [subject] class the best thing is...

8. Write down, on the left, three things that you think help students learn in your class and on the right, three things that get in the way of (or hinder) their learning your class.

Helps students to learn		Gets in the way of learning
_____→		←_____
_____→		←_____
_____→		←_____

9. Please add any other comments you would like to make about learning or what helps you to learn.

**Massey University**

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Te Kupenga o Te Mātauranga

Making Sense of Learning

Initial Interview Schedule

Students

Preamble

The approach taken in this study involves seeking to identify and make explicit how students understand learning and how they make meaning within secondary classes. Student voice and student agency are critical to this research project and as such the interviews are open ended and do not follow a specific series of questions. The goal is to begin a conversation with the students that focuses on their own understandings of learning, how they learn, and the role of their teacher in supporting or restricting their learning.

The interview will commence by asking the students to talk generally about learning and will then proceed through a spiral conversation where the interviewer is seeking to provide opportunities for the student to describe his or her understandings of what learning is, how it occurs and how teachers can support learning.

I Something successful

Tell me about something you have learned this year, not just in school but in your everyday life.

1. Can you describe how you went about learning it?
2. How did you know you had learned it?
3. What helped you learn?
4. What stumbling blocks were there?
5. What do you think learning really is?

II Learning in Secondary School

What subjects at school are you best at?

I want you to think about a recent time in [subject] class where you found something really easy to learn.

1. What was it?
2. Why was it easy?
3. What makes some things easy to learn and others more difficult?

III Learning something that is difficult

I want you to think of something that you found difficult to learn.

1. What was it?
2. Why was it so difficult?
3. Did you manage it in the end? (If so, what helped?)
4. What usually helps you learn when it's a bit of a struggle?

IV Blocks to your learning

1. Do you sometimes find that it is difficult to concentrate in the classroom? (If so, what is it that gets in the way?)
2. Do you sometimes find that it is difficult to concentrate when you are doing school work at home? (If so, what is it that gets in the way?)
3. Are there other things that get in the way of your learning at school or at home?
4. Are some subjects harder than others? (If so, which? What makes them so hard?)
5. What could teachers do to make it easier for you to learn in these subjects?

V Motivation to work hard

1. What is it that encourages you to work hard, even when the work is difficult: (*If the student finds the question difficult, explore the possibility of: targets, comparison with others, help or pressure from teachers, parents, friends.*)
2. Is there anything else you would like to say about what would help you learn better in school?

VI Feedback on your learning in secondary school

1. How do you know when you have learned something in [subject]?
2. Sometimes your teacher will give you a mark or a grade for your work and sometimes s/he will write a comment. Which do you like best? Why?
3. Do you like it when your teacher talks to you about your work while you are doing it or do you like to finish it on your own? Why?
4. When you start your next piece of work do you remember the things your teacher has said about your last piece of work?

VII Other comments

1. Are there any other comments you would like to make about learning in secondary school and what helps you to learn?