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## What can we learn from preparing students for leadership in learning with ICT in school?

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### Background

While the body of research on student voice focusing mainly on the rights of students as espoused in the UN (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child has grown, little work has been done on the relationship between students and leadership (Mitra and Gross, 2009). The impetus for this work are arguments of Smyth (2006), which suggest that it is time for schools to move away from old regimes to a different kind of educational leadership that encourages authentic forms of student participation. He proposes 'learner-centred policy generation' as a more inclusive, more democratic way of generating school policies. Democracy itself has been described as fragile (Osler and Starkey, 2006 p 433), partly because there is much variation in its scope, and in its interpretation, and also because democratic practice needs continual validation if it is to be successful. But undoubtedly, the essence of democracy is the exposure of different perspectives, which makes it worth aspiring for in the school setting.

### Research Questions

This paper presents a report on a study that examines the extent to which an ethos of shared planning and decision-making might be developed through student leadership, to improve learning with ICT at a case study school in England. 30 students (referred to as student researchers) aged between 14 and 19 at a case study school in England participate in an action research project to develop policy statements about teaching and learning with ICT, for recommendation to the school's senior management team. I report on the process of organising students as researchers, and on the consequences of their involvement as policy-makers. The student researchers are volunteers from three sections of my computer applications course. During the autumn 2009 term, they designed and conducted teacher-focused and student-focused activities. They meet regularly with the High School Technology Consortium—a group consisting of administrators, teachers and student council representatives—to reflect on their data collection strategies, and on the data. The consortium serves as "critical friends" to help them with developing the ICT policy statements.

The student researchers are divided into three classes; each class meets three times per week for a total of 3 hours 20 minutes. Before starting the project students received instruction on gathering and analysing information, and on the process of action research. There were discussions on democratic processes, and on ethical issues to be considered when involving others in research projects.

### Methods

At one level is an action research project in a case study school. Students, teachers and administrators are organised into a community of inquiry and action to address teaching and learning with ICT at the school. They engage in systematic cycles of action and reflection. In action phases, student researchers test practices and gather evidence; in reflection stages, the whole community make sense of the data and plan future action.

Case study operates at the second level of the methodology. I observe, analyse and report on the process of involving students in ICT policy-making. I will also examine the consequences of this involvement. Much of my data will be collected through observations and interviews. I will engage the research participants, who are also co-researchers in the fieldwork, in actually defining the project.

During the autumn 2009 term, the student researchers designed and conducted teacher-focused and student-focused activities to gather evidence that will provide information about the current ICT

experiences of both teachers and students at the school. They meet regularly with the High School Technology Consortium—a group consisting of administrators, teachers and student council representatives—to reflect on their strategies and on the data they collect. The consortium serves as critical friends to the students and guides them, in constructive ways, as they go about developing ICT policy statements.

## **Frame**

I build on Smyth's (2006) work on learner-centred policy generation. His arguments are akin to Luckin's (2008) plea for the development of a learner-generated context in educational technology, which she regards as a "more democratic learning economy ... where the balance between learner and teacher or mentor control is constantly changing" (p 461). Her arguments hinge on the fact that we are now faced with the situation in schools where many students know more than their teachers about digital learning tools.

There is also the issue of students' participatory rights, such as those elaborated on by Thomson and Gunter (2006). Article 12 of the UNCRC is both a substantive and procedural right entitling children to participate in matters affecting them, such as schooling, as well as enabling them to defend these rights and challenge any abuse thereof. Lansdown (2000) describes three main ways in which participation by children can be effectively carried out: consultative processes, participative initiatives, and promoting self advocacy. The study addresses all of these.

## **Research findings**

The project is still ongoing. In order to find out about the process of involving students in school ICT decision-making, the student researchers, teachers and administrators involved in the consortium were interviewed. The initial findings indicate that (a) students have a desire to play a leading role in ICT for learning, (b) teachers and administrators are willing to share power with them in the process of developing school ICT policy, and (c) there is need for an atmosphere of shared planning and decision-making about teaching and learning with ICT in school. Implications for school leadership will be explored in later interviews.

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