

**Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript**

The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

**Persistent WRAP URL:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/131753>

**How to cite:**

Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information. If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Publisher's statement:**

Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [wrap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:wrap@warwick.ac.uk).

# **Breaking the Silence: Working with Pupil Voice in Iranian Primary Schools**

*Monireh Partovi and Michael Wyness, Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick. Corresponding author is Wyness [m.wyness@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:m.wyness@warwick.ac.uk)*

**Abstract:** The paper provides analysis of findings from research on ‘pupil voice’ collected from 88 Iranian pupils within five primary classrooms. No previous research has been carried out in Iran on ‘pupil voice’ emphasizing children’s right to a say about different matters in their school lives. Two methods of data collection were applied: a) participant observation where the observer facilitated workshops within each classroom enabling children to reflect on issues that matter to them; b) individual interviews with pupils, teachers and headteachers aimed at gathering information regarding school participants’ insights into their experiences in schools, including the role of teachers, school regulations and pupil voice activities. Our data reports on the preoccupation teachers and children had with our workshop as an alternative pedagogic form in their schools. While both pupils and teachers saw the advantages of a participatory approach to classroom interactions, national, educational and pedagogic cultural factors provided substantial challenges.

**Key words:** *pupil voice, Iranian primary education, community of enquiry, Iranian culture*

## **Introduction**

Research and policy-making on pupil voice at the global and local levels has been heavily influenced by powerful neo-liberal and Eurocentric norms, which privilege rationality and individualism (Ling 2000). The dominant conception of voice is the idea

that children are incorporated within a regulated framework where they are consulted on multiple relevant issues within the school context. In this paper we explore the meaning and application of pupil voice within the Iranian primary school system; a context where there is arguably little notion of pupil voice, and where liberal norms with an emphasis on individuals as rights holders are less prominent. All Islamic countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which offers a conditional form of voice for children. However, these ratifications are the obligations that states make towards children and have been compromised by Islamic states' reservations. Notably, Iran invokes a reservation that positions Sharia Law in conflict with CRC. Iran "reserves the right not to apply any provisions or Articles of the Convention that are incompatible with Islamic laws and the internal legislation in effect." (cited in Schabas 1996, p. 478). Thus, despite subtle shifts in Islamic law in recent years, child-related policy is still framed in terms of Islamic Sharia law where there is a much stronger emphasis on children having obligations towards their elders and families rather than possessing rights (Rajabi-Ardeshiri 2009). Within this framework, as an individual rights-holder, the child's voice conflicts with the responsibilities that children have within a clearly demarcated generational hierarchy.

While there has been little research on pupil voice or pupils' conceptions of schooling in Iranian schools, in this paper, we report on empirical research framed in terms of pupil voice that took place within 5 primary schools in the Iranian capital, Tehran over 2012-13. The aims of our research were twofold. Firstly, we provided a platform for children to articulate their opinions inside the classroom, both with their peers through workshops and privately through individual interviews. We wanted to nurture more critical and creative voices among the children through classroom discussion. In facilitating interactive workshops we adopted a 'Community of Enquiry'

approach influenced by Lipman's (2003) work on teaching philosophy to children. Through the workshops we created a safe space to stimulate children's critical and creative voices through stories, giving pupils the opportunities to speculate on the issues that matter to them. The workshops were proceeded by interviews with the children, offering them a private space to reflect on the workshop discussions. Secondly, through interviews with teaching staff we focused on pupil voice from the vantage point of Iranian primary school teachers.

In the first part of the paper we discuss pupil voice as a form of pedagogic voice. We go on and discuss our methodology and the methods deployed, including a rationale for conducting the workshops and interviews. We will then analyse the data focusing on the perspectives of the teachers and children in exploring the challenges as well as the potential for pupil voice in Iranian primary schools.

### **The Significance of Pupil Voice**

In recent years, children's voices have become more audible. There is a growing commitment internationally to accommodate children's perspectives in school (Fisher 2014; Wyness 2013; Lewis 2010). A focus on children's perspectives has emerged from research both in the sphere of childhood studies and the international discourse on children's rights. Hence, policy makers, social scientists and educators have re-assessed children's capabilities, emphasizing that pupils should no longer be viewed as passive participants or learners simply in need of correction, but young people with rights to express their views in line with matters affecting their lives (Wyness 2015);

Within an educational context these ideas have been crystalised in the promotion of 'pupil voice' or 'student voice' (Cheminais, 2008, p.5). It has been suggested that the concept and practice of pupil voice enables greater dialogue to take

place between teachers and pupils, so improving the latter's capacity to learn. Rudduck and Flutter (2000, p.82) hence characterise learners as 'expert witnesses' who should help teachers to adopt the perspective of a pupil because "the world of school look(s) very different from this angle". Moreover, Soo Hoo (1993) emphasises that the connection between students and teachers is often forgotten, with teachers preferring to take advice from consultants external to their institutions of education and so "overlook(ing) the treasure in our very own backyards, the students" (1993, p.389). Consulting pupils is thus an integral feature of a listening culture in the classroom and a starting point from which educators and teachers can begin to see the wisdom in pupils' experiences of schooling (Rudduck et al, 2007) Various authors refer to different forms of pupil voice (Fielding 2007; Thomas 2007). At present the dominant modes of pupil voice in Western countries are forms of consultation between pupils and school staff, including surveys, school councils and suggestion boxes (Yamashita and Davies 2012). Nonetheless, there are a range of other means by which children may occupy advisory and supportive positions within the school (Watts and Youens, 2007). There are also several high-profile examples of pupil voice in non-Western countries. These include Las Escuelas Nuevas in Colombia where voice is built into the curriculum and pedagogy; the 'Stop Child Labour in Albania' project where Albanian school children were vocal in promoting alternatives to child labour (Kranzl-Nagl and Zartler, 2012); and national children's summits where school children represent the interests of their peers in Rwanda (Murray 2010).

However, pupil-teacher relations are complicated by a power dynamic in school and despite the prominence of pupil voice within educational discourses, children do not enjoy an equal say in schools (Moran and Murphy 2012; Bragg, 2007). We need to take account of the way that, like all other forms of pupil communication, pupil voice

in school is structured by what Arnot and Reay (2007) refer to as ‘pedagogic voice’. Drawing on a Bernsteinian framework pedagogic voice structures school and classroom interactions between teachers and pupils. Its dominant forms are *classroom talk*, and *subject talk*. (1) In the former case communication is normalised with children internalising rules of language, movement, body posture and other modes of communication. In the latter case classroom talk becomes more specialised as children try to come to grips with the language and assumptions associated with the teaching of specific subjects. Both forms of talk situate children within the classroom as subordinates and learners, dependent on the knowledge and expertise of their teachers. A third less prominent form of talk in school is *code talk*, according to Arnot and Reay (2007, p. 319), where ‘(p)upils describe(d) their identities as learners, their confidence, the processes of inclusion in learning, and the degree of control they have over the selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of knowledge’. Thus, teachers and pupils can reflect on the nature of classroom interactions, the curriculum, and school rules, in effect, rules that structure pupil engagement in school, rules that these children may have been hitherto expected to be taken for granted.

In one sense code talk can be viewed as a version of pupil voice in allowing children to explore the fundamental features of schooling. It offers the potential for children to present an alternative set of ideas individually and collectively about the nature of their schooling. In these terms there is the possibility of opposition from teaching staff, whose professional and social interests may align more closely with the status quo in school (Bragg, 2007).

At the same time pupil voice is likely to be framed within the two normative modes of communication which dominate pupil and teacher interactions: classroom talk and subject talk. Pupil voice becomes a form of pupil consultation, which relies on

teachers structuring or inviting children to reflect on their schooling. Teachers regulate the form and content of pupil voice. Moreover, as with classroom talk and subject talk children should internalise what are referred to as ‘recognition and realization rules’ (Arnot and Reay 2007, p. 322). That is, they have to learn the deeply embedded norms and expectations of routine classroom discourse

Students are expected to communicate in a certain way about their learning with the teacher using appropriate language forms (classroom and subject talk), express appropriate needs at appropriate moments, and display a high level of trust, patience, the motivation to learn and appropriate family support (Arnot and Reay 2007, p. 322).

Pupil voice in the form of code talk is heavily circumscribed by the interests of the school. Pupil voice becomes an extension or refinement of dominant but embedded forms of communication and interaction to which pupils have access. At the same time there is a Foucaultian sense in which children internalize ‘recognition and realization rules’ as a form of self-regulation (Foucault 1977). While the hierarchy may be temporarily loosened to allow pupils space and time for reflection, the same rules of engagement apply to initiatives and practices that flow from pupil voice as to the more conventionally teacher dominated classroom and subject talk. Nevertheless, pupil voice does offer the potential for some pupil engagement with school structures and the opportunity to reflect on key features of school life.

In our research we introduced a more collective form of pupil voice through the workshops, which are discussed in the next section. We offered the children a collective space through which they could reflect on their schooling. Arnot and Reay (2007) refer to a fourth mode of communication in school, ‘identity talk’ which tends to operate

away from teachers, surreptitiously at the back of classrooms, in playgrounds and extending out of school into communities. There is the potential for some of this identity talk to surface within the classroom through collective pupil engagement with staff in school. The workshops provided a combination of code talk and identity talk structured around groups of children working together reflecting on the nature of their schooling.

## **Methodology**

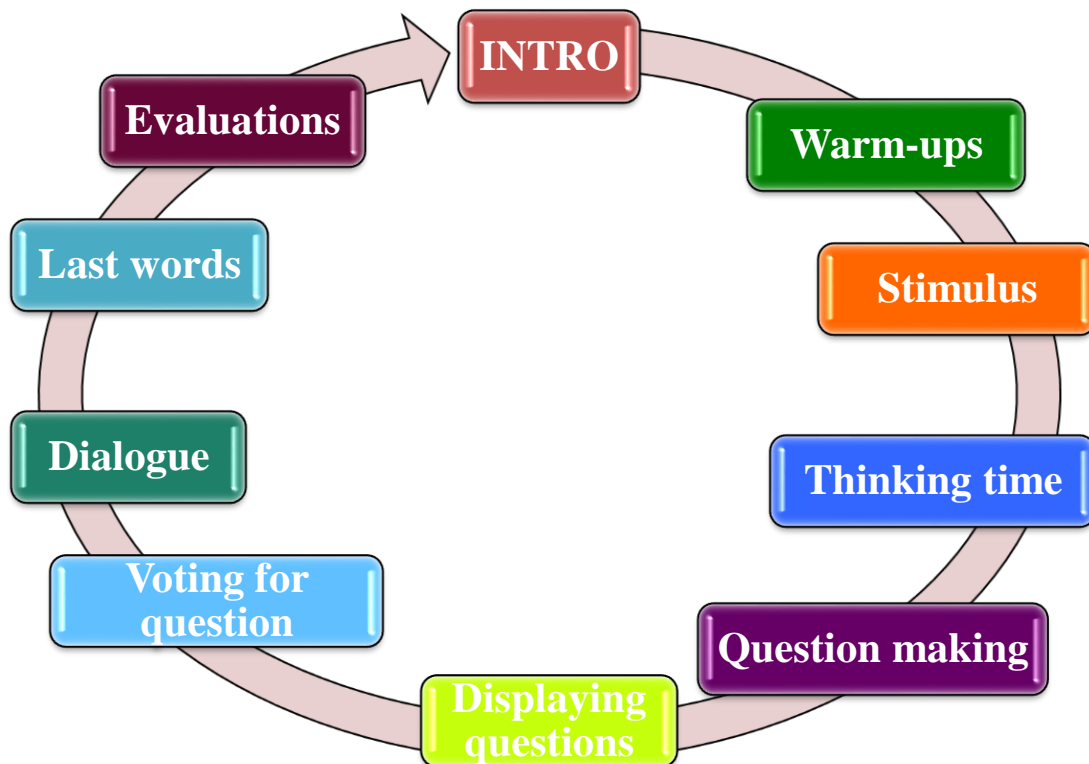
Our methodology focused primarily on creating safe and non-judgmental spaces within which children can reflect on their schooling. In this sense we were developing a form of pupil voice. In the next stage of the research process, we conducted individual interviews with each participant. The interviews gave them an opportunity to reflect on the workshops as well as to talk about levels and forms of participation in school; the extent to which pupil voice is a part of classroom interactions and more broadly how they see their schooling. Due to the nature of the study, which involved capturing pupils' thoughts, the aspect of gaining their trust was both desirable and necessary. The workshops were carried out before the children were interviewed, aiming to not only provide a pedagogic space within which children could reflect on their school, but also to develop closer contact between the children and the researcher and build up a good rapport with the participants. It is important to note, during the process we welcomed silence in children: staying quiet for children was embraced as a way to shift the power to them and their personal choice and right. In this sense pupil voice is about assisting children to find a role that "allows (them) not only to speak but also to stay silent, to have some control...over the conditions of communication" (Oswell 2013, p.106). Having access to voice here is not simply about children's audible voices, it entails children choosing not to speak, giving the discursive space over to others.



Workshops with the pupils were designed and run by one of the authors based on the Community of Enquiry approach. This approach encourages children's critical thinking based on Lipman's philosophy for children programme (Lipman, 2003). According to Lipman (2003) we cannot encourage children to develop enquiring minds without seeing education itself as a process of enquiry. Similarly, Arendt (1961) has argued that schools provide a regulated space within which children are encouraged to reflect on key themes with teachers and their peers. This pedagogical approach has been extensively recognised and is now used as 'an international educational initiative' by a range of educators throughout the world (Jackson, 2001, p.2; Hand & Winstanley, 2008).

Within this pedagogical approach, the classroom teacher shares a stimulus such as a story or picture book to help the pupils generate questions and explore issues affecting their daily lives (Stanley, 2006, p.2). A combination of ice breaking and thought-provoking games and activities were used to invite the children to work in groups and to try to encourage them to reason and thinking critically in relaxed ways. The structure of the lesson plan is depicted in figure 1. This included an introduction, warm up activities, and the presentation of a stimulus to the children. The main stimulus for the workshops in this study was stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*. This decision was made in order to bring a flavour of Persian culture to the research while working with Iranian children in Iran. It has been argued among some scholars that despite the *Nights* stories being cross-cultural, the origin nonetheless comes from Persian tales called *Hezar Afsan* (Beyzaie, 2011). The children were then given 'thinking time', and worked together in generating questions for discussion. The rest of the session was taken up with discussing the preferred question and final reflections

Figure 1: 10 steps (Partovi 2014)



The *One Thousand and One Nights* stories provide a mysterious promise to their listeners where change occurs even though it may seem impossible (Warner, 2011, p. 4-5). The frame story starts with the patriarchy of the king and the ingenuity of the female character, Scheherazade, who had to choose a way to delay her death. She therefore chose to tell stories and through storytelling to her sister, she began an indirect dialogue with the king, intended not only to defend her life and all those of her country's daughter's lives, but also to open the king's vision of being human and his responsibility as a ruler. Winston argues (1995, p.82), 'it is through imaginative engagement with the symbolisms and the narrative art of tales that children become involved, both emotionally and cognitively'. Hence, stories from the Nights collection encourage pupils to raise different questions after listening to the tales.

For instance, after telling the frame story, children in one of the girls' classrooms started the dialogue by trying to understand the king as a person not as a king.

Parto: *'he was angry because he heard the queen was wishing for his death and all the maids were listening. He felt he was not good and everyone thinks badly about him'*

Maryam tried to analyse the king's feelings: *'he was wrong, but he was angry, he was hurt'*.

Aram was asking *'Revenge is not always wrong Miss, no? Like when a murderer killed your beloved ones, you should revenge'*. Raising this issue invited the children to picture the situation from different angles.

Kimia indicated to Aram's point by saying *'revenge would not help because the sadness of your loss never leaves your heart'*.

Parto added *'I agree with Kimia. You feel even worse'...*

Children then voted for this question: ***'why don't we like some people?'***

(Partovi 2014)

The role of the fieldworker was crucial here in enabling children to talk within the workshops. At the same time there was an attempt to minimize the role of the researcher within the classroom. The fieldworker was one of the authors, a young Iranian woman who speaks Farsi, the official language in Iran (2). It was hoped that the fieldworker would minimize any disruption to routine classroom activities. At the same time the workshops became a form of intervention. As we discuss in the analysis, the interviews with children and teachers disclosed few opportunities for children to reflect on their lives and their schooling. While the workshops were primarily a means of generating data, we were at the same time introducing a very different pedagogy and practice into the research classrooms, a pedagogy that encourages more dialogue among

school participants. There was thus an inevitable sense in which through the research process we were introducing a particular version of pupil voice into the classroom.

Establishing access to state schools proved difficult because research conducted in Iranian schools requires the agreement of the Ministry of Education and this permission was very challenging and time-consuming to obtain. On the other hand, one of the researchers was able to use her personal contacts and gain access through the head teachers of private schools. The research was undertaken in 5 private schools: 3 boys' schools and 2 girls' schools. It is important to note that it is common for families in Tehran to send their children to private schools and this tendency was not specific to any one social class. This small-scale study did not place a specific focus on gender but the findings indicated that girls were willing to identify themselves with story characters of their own gender. For instance, on one side, the students perceived neglected young girls who were the victims of patriarchal power. On the other hand, girls connected with Scheherazade, who was a true inspiration in seeking to take difficulties into her own hands. This binary image of the female characters may thus lead children to put themselves in the shoes of the character which could lead them to ignore the stereotypical image of neglected young girls when they declared that 'they don't like victims'. (Jose, 1989).

In these schools we ran 6 hours of workshops on a weekly basis for 6 weeks with 88 pupils in total aged between 9 and 11. To gain a holistic and in-depth understanding of each pupil's views regarding the workshops and to highlight their opinions about various aspects of their school life, we conducted individual interviews following the workshops with all the pupils, across the five schools. Children's interviews started with 'ice breaking' questions such as 'Tell me about the sessions we had together?' The researcher asked them whether they enjoyed the sessions and what they liked the most

or did not like. Then we talked about the challenges they experienced during the workshops and generally at their schooling. Their relationship with classrooms teachers were discussed and they were asked whether it is important to express views/feeling. Flash cards with a provocative sentence written on them such as ‘let’s pretend children swapped places with teachers’ were used. The aim here was to get a sense children’s perspectives on whether they wanted access to teacher’s power and control, even if just in their imagination.

We also wanted to get a sense of how teaching staff in the research schools understood their professional practice in relation to the notion of pupil voice and more broadly encourage them to reflect on the culture of schooling in Iran. To this end we interviewed 5 teachers and the head teachers from each of the 5 schools. Teachers were asked questions to elicit their perspectives about the sessions and whether they thought giving children a voice and encouraging them to think for themselves was important and, if so, how they would implement this in their teaching. Moreover, the head teachers were asked questions to gain some general ideas about the school and the ways they promoted and encouraged pupils to talk about their views, and also whether the critical thinking skills were encouraged within the current curriculum.

Digital voice recorders were used for the workshops and interviews. The data was transcribed in a systematic manner and stored in a separate file. In this study the combination of content analysis and constant comparison analysis between interview and observation data was used to reduce subjective interpretation and make the discussion more robust. In particular, a thematic approach was adopted when analysing the interview data. The transcripts were coded and trends, patterns and frequencies were identified (Grey 2009). Similarly, field notes were taken during the workshops, generating

observational data. The data were divided up into several categories, including 'generating suggestions; 'conceptual explorations' and 'children's reflections'.

We followed BERA's (2013) ethical conventions and sought permission to undertake this research from Warwick university ethics committee. We gave out a participation sheet to all respondents and the ethics sheets were completed offering informed consent. We changed the names of the participants when writing up our findings.

## **Data Analysis**

Our aim was to generate reflections from pupils and teachers on the potential for pupil voice in the workshops and the interviews. Our analysis here draws out three themes from the data which largely counterpose key features of the research workshops and the nature of classroom engagement within Iranian primary schools. First, we contextualize the reflections on pupil voice by setting out the nature of the school system and the significance of a top-down conception of classroom talk within Iranian primary schools. Second, we focus on one of the key features of the workshops, collaborative work. We explore the cultural barriers to children and teachers working in collaboration. Third, we outline the difficulties that the pupils had engaging with the 'public' nature of pupil voice.

### *The Dominance of classroom talk*

The concept of pupil voice is prominent in Western systems of schooling. However, in this paper we will explore pupil voice and related ideas within an Iranian education context. National development and integration are the primary aims of education in Iran

in nurturing social, moral and spiritual values, emphasising Islamic faith (UNESCO, 2011, p.2). Iran's formal education system falls under the administration of the Ministry of Education and includes free state schools and fee-paying private schools; the latter is now very common in Iran, especially in the largest cities. The education system is divided into two cycles - primary and secondary - with single-sex schools in both sectors. Each sector lasts for 6 years and is divided into two 3-year sub-cycles (National Curriculum of Islamic Republic of Iran, 2013).

In Iran primary education is compulsory for children of age 7-12 years, covering the school grades 1-6. Primary schooling has as its objective to provide an appropriate environment for moral and religious development, as well as numeracy and literacy skills (The International Bureau of Education of UNESCO, 2011). Yet the school curriculum is heavily focused on transmitting information to pupils and applying routine learning skills focused on memorising facts for specific subjects, in Bernsteinian terms, 'top heavy' forms of classroom and subject talk. The Iranian system offers little opportunity for pupils to learn reflectively and apply their newly learnt knowledge to their lives (Mirhadi, 1998). Iranian pedagogy generally follows Skinner's behaviourist theory of learning where each learner is a 'Tabula Rasa' or 'blank slate' whose learning style is shaped by their teacher's positive or negative style of reinforcement. This 'operant conditioning' approach focuses upon the use of rewards or punishment in teaching practice (Yousefi, 2010, pp.30-35).

Most Iranian primary classrooms have a separate teacher for each subject taught. The emphasis at primary level is on Arnot and Reay's (2007) classroom and subject talk. The main form of pupil talk appears in discussion of subject material and rarely in other forms of classroom talk. According to Mroz et al. (2000, p. 380), teachers

transform classroom talk into 'teaching technology' to give rise to a more directive-based form of teaching involving factual questions with predictable answers.

Power is central to the analysis of children's capacity to reflect within their classrooms. According to Lawler (2008, p.55) 'power has conventionally been theorized as a prohibitive, denying force, working from the "top down"'. Foucault states that power can have 'regulatory or normalizing' effects. Power in these terms is a 'practically socially situated capacity to control others' actions' (Fricker 2007, p. 14). In Fricker's (2007) view power can be exercised either actively or passively. Adults can use their power actively to reward a child or punish her. Passive power is the belief that even if teachers do not punish or reward students their presence will have an influence on the way children behave and respond. Active and passive forms become part of a regulatory framework within which children are positioned in class and in the way that classroom expectations and common practice are adopted by the children (Partovi 2014).

Regulatory power was apparent in the research classrooms in the way that children were conditioned to be silent. Teachers rewarded the children with a points card system which allowed them to accumulate points for good behaviour and receive a prize. In one of the boys' classes the teaching assistant brought the researcher the points cards and asked her to give them out in order to ensure they were quiet. The researcher refused to use the cards: the teacher replied 'it's up to you, but they will never stay quiet if you don't give them points'. During the period the researcher spent in different schools, these attitudes were more noticeable in boys' schools than girls. The norm of silence in class was critical in narrowing space for the development of pupil voice. There were simply no channels through which children could talk about



their schooling in class. Thus, a majority of the pupils (77) stated that they would stay quiet if any issue made them unhappy at school.

The research workshops were a pedagogic departure for the children and the teachers. This approach challenged existing classroom arrangements offering an alternative means of communication; a more collective means through which children were able to reflect with each other; and a space within which children could respond to the stimuli offered by the facilitator. There is an ambiguity here with respect to 'recognition and realization rules' discussed earlier (Arnot and Reay 2007). The teacher establishes the ground rules through which participants engage with the content of community of enquiry and children are likely to find it easier to take part where they are immersed in classroom and subject talk. At the same time there is also an important collective dimension to the community of enquiry with children in a position to crystallise and reflect upon their interests as a group. This takes us close to Arnot and Reay's (2007) concept of identity talk. There was potential for some of this identity talk to surface within the classroom particularly through pupil engagement within the community of enquiry. Yet, the workshops were at odds with the culture and practice within the primary schools we researched. 'Voice' here was predominantly top down: dominated by classroom and subject talk. Teachers were mainly focused on imparting information to pupils. The workshops provided a conflicting frame of reference for the children. As Hiran, a 10 year old boy commented on the workshops: 'we never had this kind of sessions at school that a teacher was asking about our opinions. No one knew what to say'.

During interviews with the teachers, the curriculum was viewed as being demanding and inflexible making it difficult for them to create cross-curricular activities, allowing children the space to learn through forms of dialogue. One teacher

commented:

Our education system has been based on a monologue pedagogy for years and now some younger teachers want to move to more student centred pedagogy, but we don't know how to apply it to the classroom so we end up wasting so much time and not being successful in doing it in the end.

'Monologue pedagogy' referred to by this teacher emphasizes the top-down uni-directional forms of communication between teachers and children in the classroom. Teachers were not required to be more innovative, with the curriculum being dictated to teachers in advance. There was little demand for them to work harder to make their lesson plans more innovative. The risk was that conscientious teachers would lose their passion for teaching. She stated 'I can see that this system is diminishing creativity in children, I feel sad. If I didn't love children I would leave teaching forever'. Another teacher shared her professional experience and gave the example of how, in a history session, she encouraged pupils to watch a satellite programme about *Cyrus the Great* and his *Achaemenid Empire*. The pupils were given an assignment to share their research in class and so give their opinion on 'Cyrus the Great'. However, the response of the school proved very negative to her eyes and demotivated her: 'Children really enjoyed the session, but I was given a notification from the head teacher the next day that I should never do it again'.

Physical spaces for learning play an important role in the way children engage with their learning (Fisher, 2014, Alexander 2000; Beigi and Shirmohammadi, 2012). Findings from this study show that not only did the prevailing pedagogy prevent pupils from learning to work together and be active participants in their classroom, but also according to teachers' responses, the classroom setting - having benches in rows - made

it hard to engage in cooperative activities inside the classroom. One teacher suggested that, 'classroom setting and the way children sit makes it difficult to do collaborative work'. The Iranian primary classrooms in this study were seen as square-shaped with few possibilities to display pupils' work publicly. Moreover, students sat regimented in pairs on benches or on individual chairs in linear rows facing the black or white boards. The teacher's desk was usually placed in front of the students with the teachers' desks raised above the pupils, permitting teachers to watch the children at all times. This arrangement allows full surveillance of the children, as well as highlighting the teachers' formal 'sovereign' authority over children. In fact, this form of arranging the classroom may have an influence in making pupils less interactive. This form of classroom reminds us of Bentham's Panopticon. Hence, the emphasis was on children learning to survey themselves so developing self-discipline or policing their own actions according to the classroom rules (Foucault, 1991).

### *Collaborative learning and cultural ambiguity*

We have noted that the prevailing pedagogy and classroom settings in Iranian primary schools are a barrier to pupils and teachers working creatively together and reflecting on social and curricular issues. One of the key features of the research workshops is the collaborative nature of the engagement between participants. However, the children and teachers argued that collaborative work was a further barrier working creatively and reflexively. As one teacher mentioned

Our classroom settings prevent us from doing group work, but also our culture emphasizes keeping one's thoughts within oneself and not sharing. I can see that when children want to write, they put their pencil case in between or trying

to hide their work, so as not to allow their classmates to see their work. We don't trust each other. We think sharing means losing our ideas and once we share ideas, others will steal and copy our work.

This lack of collaboration is interesting given the cultural association of collectivism with Iran. Hofstede (2003) proposed five cultural dimensions and typologies when classifying different countries globally. One dimension is the extent to which a country is either collectivist or individualist (Nejati et al, 2010, p.106). According to Hofstede, in individualist societies everyone is supposed to care about one's self and immediate family, so ties between individuals are loose. On the other hand, in collectivist countries such as Iran, the interest of the group is more important than the interest of the individual. For instance, in this study, it was observed that calling children by their family names instead of their first name is common in Iranian primary schools. This was more obvious to the researcher when she was playing the beanbag game with children in the first workshop, when she noticed that they called their classmates by their family names not their first names when passing the beanbag to each other.

While there are elements of a 'collective' approach to social relations, others are more skeptical arguing that there is also a powerful individualism within Iranian society. This cultural ambiguity is apparent in the way that Iranian's work together within professional and educational contexts. Nejati et al, (2010) argue that there is only an indirect relationship between the criteria of being a collective society and the level of teamwork performance. Several factors might affect team performance within an Iranian school context, including trust issues, poor communication skills and a competitive education culture more focused on scores and individual achievement. Thus, despite the assessment that Iran is a collectivist country, Bar (2004 cited in Beigi

& Shirmohammdi, 2012, p.296) argues that

some observers of Iranian culture have described the Iranian proclivity towards individualism as the result of geographic conditions, modalities of family life, or the despotic structure of all political regimes, forcing the individual to fend for himself and his family (sic) and not to trust anyone outside of his intimate circle.

Beigi and Shirmohammdi (2012) propose that an important source of this individualism and Iranian people's neglect of team work is rooted in the education system where individuals are from an early age encouraged to compete with each other. Schooling rarely creates a collaborative learning environment, providing the necessary skills for teamwork. To exemplify: Iranians who work abroad are often very successful members of their teams in their foreign countries, but do not perform as well during team-work in their native country. In fact, Iranian employees typically learn the necessary teamwork skills within the teamwork environment of their foreign countries of work (Nejati et al, 2010, p.108).

Our data supports the contention of the absence of team work. Group work was rarely practiced in class. As one head teacher stated:

in our school system we consider it to be a normal class when all children are sitting quietly. When we hear children talk together, exchange ideas in groups we will give a knock on the classroom door to give notification to the classroom teacher because other teachers may complain that they need silence to teach their lessons.

Moreover, when conducting the research, the fieldworker faced difficulties when doing

group activities in a classroom in one of the boys' schools. In the final workshop the fieldworker asked the boys 'why is it so hard to cooperate and listen to each other in this class?' Their reasons were more general saying that 'because no-one wants to accept the rules'. Amir stated:

Miss, Iranian people are like this in general. I don't know about the previous generation but all of the Iranian children are the same in this respect. I was watching a Japanese program on TV, I saw children in the kindergarten even know how to take turns and listen and wait when someone is talking. We don't know Miss.

Ali disagreed with this point, stating that 'I disagree with Amir, Miss. what are the differences between Iranian children and other children in other countries? We can also be disciplined and learn it if we want'.

The researcher asked them if they had any suggestions for solving this issue. Amir was the one who emphasized the essentials of learning how to cooperate stating that 'we should learn how to cooperate. When someone is talking we should listen and not raise our hands. Because when we interrupt the person who is talking this makes him stressed'. Kia continued stating:

Miss, we all know we should cooperate but we just say this without willing to do it. In our PE sessions no one cooperates properly. They only want to be with their friends in one group or play with whoever plays better. We don't collaborate Miss.

Farhad agreed claiming that they knew the importance of cooperation and mutual respect but did not actually want to put those skills into practice.

### *Pupil Voice as public performance*

Issues of trust and privacy are important when the pupils were asked to reflect on the workshops in the interviews. The critical idea here was the public nature of the workshops, which generated concern for some pupils. The data suggest that a significant minority of children (34 out of 88) found it difficult to talk about their views publically during the sessions. In some instances, the act of reflecting itself was seen as a challenge - some referred to 'giving reasons' as the most challenging feature of the fieldwork. As Amir stated when discussing what was happening in the research workshops:

You were asking us to think before talking about our ideas. In general, thinking is not easy. When I wanted to talk I should have thought first about the concept, compared different ideas then talked about my opinions. I can't say it was easy.

There were potentially cognitive and experiential factors at work here: children were aged between 9 and 11 with limited experience of having to reflect on aspects of their lives. Children were unlikely to have had much experience of dialogical approaches within their classroom. Moreover, they had limited experience of being asked to explore or reflect on issues that affected them. As the data from the teachers presented earlier in the paper imply, classroom setting and dominant pedagogies limit the extent to which children are able to generate or participate in dialogue.

The difficulties children had putting forward reasons were compounded by the public nature of these processes. The children found structured collective

reflections difficult: the fact that they took place in the classroom which was seen as a public forum exacerbated the apprehension. We might speculate here that ‘recognition and realisation rules’ in Iranian primary schools inhibit children from expressing their opinions in class. Classroom and subject talk is highly prescriptive with little space for children to articulate and share ideas with their peers (Arnot and Reay 2007). Pupils mentioned that their opinions were private and they did not feel comfortable sharing their views in the classroom in front of others. As one girl stated ‘I don’t like sharing my personal thoughts in front of my classmates. My thoughts are mine’. The children also mentioned that ‘feeling shy’ was another inhibiting factor, with Bardia saying that ‘It was hard to talk about my opinions because I was feeling shy’. Five other pupils repeated this response, referring to ‘feeling worried about being judged by classmates’ as an obstacle to preventing them from taking part in the discussion and talking about their views.

Similarly, the public nature of the initiative had implications for the pupils’ sense of self and the extent to which their reflections and responses would affect their peer relations. One pupil mentioned the experience was not easy as she could see that her classmates became upset after she said what she thought. She explained the matter thus: ‘I felt uncomfortable seeing my classmates get upset because they didn’t like my comments. I don’t like making others upset. I found it hard to say what I really think’.

Despite some reluctance to reflect publicly with their peers, the children made a distinction between ‘opinions’ and ‘feelings’. They were more optimistic in sharing their opinions than feelings, as the majority of them emphasized that ‘feelings are private’. Thus, while reasoning for some children was quite difficult, there was a sense



that children could respond to a stimulus from the teacher or claims and questions from peers, if it did not mean revealing their feelings about these issues. In some respects, the reticence towards disclosing their emotions in front of peers follows from the culture of individualism and the secrecy relating to classroom work discussed in the previous section. There was an emphasis on concealing rather than sharing. The emotional dimension was viewed as a relatively closed and private dimension of their being. Some children mentioned that they only shared their feelings with very close people and the people who they trusted. As Mohammad commented, 'you can share your feelings with your parents in a quiet place when no one else is there'. Some mentioned that they shared their feelings, but only in terms of general aspects not personal ones, and they emphasized that it was not good to share negative feelings because others may be hurt. While there is perhaps a reluctance to discuss feelings, there was also an empathetic dimension with children very conscious of the possible consequences for others of what they say about them within a public setting. As one boy Parsa stated, 'I may have negative feelings about my classmate and if I tell him, he'll get hurt'.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

While the research was not offering comparative empirical data in politically and culturally distinctive educational contexts, it is difficult not to comment on the similarities and differences between Iranian/Tehranian and Western or English schools, particularly given that our research introduced a participatory and reflective form of pedagogy in the Tehranian schools that emerges from Western theory. Participatory pedagogies are still rare in English schools. However, pupil voice has become a more

familiar feature of policy and practice in English schools. Our data from the 5 primary schools in Tehran identified general teaching and learning approaches as top down and highly prescriptive, generating ‘scripted’ forms of classroom and subject talk between teachers and pupils. There was little sense in which pupil voice or ‘code talk’ had any place within our research schools in Tehran. There are ‘family resemblances’ between Iranian and English primary classrooms in terms of children’s relative lack of experience and cognitive capacities, and teachers’ reflections on introducing participatory initiatives within a crowded and performance oriented curriculum (Partovi 2014). If we return to Arnot and Reay’s (2006) notion of pedagogic voice, irrespective of the inclusion of pupil voice or ‘code talk’, any space that children have to engage with pedagogy or the curriculum is heavily circumscribed by ‘recognition and realisation’ rules, codes of conduct laid down by teachers. We are mindful of being Eurocentric in promoting a liberal conception of pupil voice. Post-colonial theory provides a framework for being cautious when exploring the influence of Western values globally (Ling 2004). At the same time, one of the obstacles to collaborative learning in our study was a competitive form of individualism within the classrooms, a particular form of individualism found in Western classrooms. However, a culture of child centredness in English primary schools, what Alexander (2000, p. 536) refers to as the ‘Anglo-American tradition’, makes it easier to merge curricular imperatives with dialogic teaching approaches among groups of children in class. Our data suggests that the community of enquiry workshops introduced through the research in the Iranian classrooms, were disconnected from pedagogical routines and practices referred to by the Iranian children and teaching staff.

The workshops in the research schools were both an opportunity and a challenge for Iranian pupils and their teachers in this study. Teacher and pupil reflections on the

workshops revealed some enthusiasm for practices that allowed a degree of pupil voice within the classroom. At the same time, routine practices within the classroom were underpinned by cultural and professional expectations that worked against any strong commitment to more dialogical relations and practices within these primary schools. A formalized culture of privacy inhibited any communication networks that allowed for any forms of pupil voice. This reflects a complex relationship between collectivism, with its commitment to family and community and an implicit individualism which made it difficult for the children to enter into more dialogical approaches with their peers in class.

The workshops and the follow up interviews were central in this research, as a means of stimulating reflections among the Iranian participants and through these reflections the generation of data on their schooling and the concept of pupil voice. Moreover, in the process, this form of participative methodological approach generated some challenges for the researcher. One potential methodological issue with this research was the extent to which the workshops could be viewed as a form of intervention. It was clear from some of the data that we collected that the frame of reference for the participants in reflecting on the nature of their classroom interactions and the possibility of pupil voice, was the research workshops. While the workshops were primarily a means of generating reflexive data from the children on topics around the theme of pupil voice, the research workshops themselves were a vehicle for promoting a collaborative version of pupil voice. It is worth mentioning that within childhood studies researchers are now much more aware that participatory methodologies both generate data on participation but become a means through which children are able to participate (Christensen and James 2017). Thus, despite the small-scale nature of our project, the workshops had transformational potential to nurture

children's critical and creative voices. This way pupils are encouraged to reflect on the assumptions they make and find connections between different ideas, to explore alternative views or to change views. Some teachers were supportive of the workshops in that they saw them as a pedagogic tool that allowed children to reflect and think about the statements that they make. Nevertheless, we are conscious that our research will have had an impact on the perceptions that teachers and pupils had of their own routine interactions in class.

Another issue we had to reflect on was the extent to which we were broaching on controversial issues in the workshops and the interviews. Careful consideration of participants' and the researcher's safety and well-being were considered when preparing for the field work. On occasion, the fieldwork researcher had to lead the conversation into a safer direction or even stop the dialogue and change the topic. Despite all the challenges, we would argue that children need to be given a safe and non-judgmental space for exchanging ideas on their lives in school as well as reflect on the structure, content and ethos of their schools. Through different forms of code talk children should be in a position to develop their 'identities as learners' (Arnot and Reay 2007, p. 319). Classrooms ought to be places where children's identities can be disclosed and reflected upon with others. Hannah Arendt described a classroom as a 'space of appearance' serving as a 'public sphere' where children could be seen and heard by everybody (Passerin d'Entrèves in Mouffe, 1992, p.146). Indeed, children need to be given the right to be heard and seen.

This work was not supported by funding organisations.

## **Notes**

1. Bernstein's work focuses on the way that language and communication in school both reproduces and shapes social inequalities and power relations within the broader society (Bernstein 1971).
2. The fieldwork was part of a PhD conducted by the fieldworker, who was Iranian and had lived in the UK for about 5 years. The other author supervised the work and has researched and written on different forms of pupil voice.

## References

- Alexander, R. (2000) *Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education*, (Oxford, Blackwell).
- Arendt, H. (1961) *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, (London, Penguin Books).
- Arksey, H. & Knight, P. (1999) *Interviewing for Social Scientists*, London: SAGE
- Arnot, M. & Reay, D (2007) A sociology of pedagogic voice: power, inequality and pupil consultation, *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*, 28(3), 311-325
- Beigi, M & Shirmohammadi, M (2012) Attitudes toward teamwork: are Iranian university students ready for the workplace? *Team Performance Management*, 18, 5/6, 295-311
- Bernstein, B. (1971) *Class Codes and Control*, vol. 1, London: Paladin.
- Bragg, S (2007) 'But I listen to children anyway! Teacher perspectives on pupil, *Educational Action Research*, 15, 4, 505-518
- Cheminais, R (2008) *Engaging Pupil Voice to Ensure that Every Child Matters: A Practical Guide* (Abingdon, Routledge).
- Christensen, P. and James, A. (eds) (2017) *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*, third edition, (London, Falmer).
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research Methods in Education*, London: Routledge

- Fielding, M. (2007) Beyond “voice”: new roles, relations and contexts in researching with young people. *Discourse: Studies in Cultural Politics of Education*, 28 (3): 301-310.
- Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, (London, Allen Lane).
- Fricker, M (2007) *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Hand, M. & Winstanley, C. (2008) *Philosophy in Schools*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group
- Hofstede, G. (2010) *Cultures and Organisations* (New York, McGraw-Hill)
- Jackson, T. (2001) The Art and Craft of Gently Socratic Enquiry, in: Costa, A, (2001) *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*, USA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development
- Jose, P. (1989) the role of Gender and Gender Role Similarity in Readers Identification with Story Characters, *Sex Roles*, 21(9/10), pp697-713
- Kranzl-Nagl, R. and Zartler, U. (2010) Children’s Participation in School and Community. In: B. Percy-Smith and N. Thomas (eds) *A Handbook of Children’s Participation*. London: Routledge.
- Lawler, S. (2008) *Identity: sociological perspectives* (Cambridge, Polity)
- Lewis, A. (2010) Silence in the Context of ‘Child Voice’, *Children and Society*, 24 (1), 14-23
- Ling, L. (2004) Cultural Chauvinism and the Liberal Democratic Order, in: Chowdhry, G. and Nair, S. (eds) *Power, Post-colonialism and International Relations*, (London, Routledge).
- Lipman, M. (2003) *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

- Mirhadi, T. (1998) *A search for methods in education* (Tehran, Aghah Publications).
- Mroz. M.A., Smith F. & Hardman. F. (2000) the discourse of the literacy hour, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30(3), pp.379–390
- Moran, P. and Murphy, M. (2012) Habermas, Pupil Voice, Rationalism and their Meeting with Lacan’s *Objet Petit a*, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 31, 2, pp: 171-181.
- Mouffe, C. (1992) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy* (London, Routledge).
- National Curriculum of Islamic Republic of Iran, (2013) Available online at: <http://medu.ir/portal/home.php?ocode=100010876&block=regulations&ctg=1> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> April 2017]
- Murray, C. (2010) ‘Children’s Rights in Rwanda: A Hierarchical or Parallel Model of Implementation’, *International Journal of Children’s Rights* 18(3), 387–403.
- Nejati, M., Nejati, M. & Nami, B. (2010) Teamwork approach: an investigation on Iranian teamwork attitudes, *Canadian Social Science*, 6(3), 104-113
- Oswell, D. (2013) *The Agency of Children: from Family to Global Human Rights*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Partovi, M. (2014) *An inquiry into pupil voice in five Iranian and two English schools*, Unpublished PhD Thesis (United Kingdom, University of Warwick).
- Rajabi-Ardeshiri, M. (2009) The Rights of the Child in the Islamic Context: The Challenges of the Local and the Global, *The International Journal of Children’s Rights*, 17(3), 475-489
- Rudduck, J. & McIntyre, D. (2007) *Improving Learning through Consulting Pupils* (London, Routledge).
- Schabas, W. (1996) Reservations to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, *Human Rights Quarterly*, 2: pp: 472-491

- Shirazi, R. (2014) The pedagogy of Visibility: Constructs and contests of Iranianness in a Community-Organised School in a Large Southern US City, *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 8 (2), 108-124.
- SooHoo, S (1993) Students as partners in research and restricting schools, *The Educational Forum*, 57, 386-392
- Thomas, N. (2007) Towards a Theory of Children's Participation, *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 15, 2 pp: 199-218.
- UNESCO (2011) *World Data on Education* (Geneva, UNESCO)
- Watts, R. Youens, B. (2007) Harnessing the potential of **pupils** to influence school development. *Improving Schools*. 10, 1, pp: 18-28.
- Wyness, M. (2015) *Childhood* (Cambridge, Polity).
- Wyness, M. (2013) Children's Participation and Inter-Generational Dialogue: Bringing Adults back into the Analysis, *Childhood*, 20, 4, pp: 429-442.
- Yousefi, A. (2010) *Teaching International Relations in Iran: Challenges and Prospects*, Annual Conference of the Canadian Political Science Association June 2-3, 2010, Concordia University, Montreal.