

Leading Learning in Intelligent Schools

Listening to Student Voice

Susan Groundwater-Smith

**Director Centre for Practitioner Research, Faculty of Education & Social Work
University of Sydney**

susangs@inet.net.au

Introduction – The Intelligent School:

Let us think first about human intelligence. If you “google” the phrase you will be offered 3 630 000 entries to explore, it will take 82 seconds to find them. You may delve into the work of Alfred Binet who first systematically sought to find ways of differentiating intellectual abilities among young children in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century, or that of Edward Thorndike who distinguished between abstract intelligence, mechanical intelligence (understanding how the world works) and social intelligence (functioning successfully in interpersonal relations) prior to World War II. More recently you would come across Howard Gardner’s notion of multiple intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, personal, interpersonal and intra-personal; or Daniel Goleman’s concept of emotional intelligence; and, if you were feeling really brave you might delve into Daniel Dennett and discussions of human intelligence versus artificial intelligence. No matter which track you take it becomes clear that what we are exploring is a melange of adaptability, creativity and insight all conducted in social contexts.

Given, that those of us who work in and with schools will have been long exposed to ideas about intelligence it is interesting that it is only in very recent years that we have come to understand that it is an attribute that can be afforded not only to individuals but also to organizations.

Writers are now coming to think of schools as organizations that can behave more or less intelligently. Yinger and Hendricks-Lee (1993) argue that there is something called ecological intelligence which is more than a crude sum of the parts. Yinger & Hendricks-Lee suggest that ecological intelligence has three characteristics:

- Knowledge is inherent and widely dispersed within systems;
- Knowledge becomes available as working knowledge in particular activities and events;
- Working knowledge is constructed jointly by participants and systems in an activity.
(p.100)

MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (2004) have focused upon schools as institutions that are dynamic and organic in their nature. Drawing on notions of multiple intelligence and recent thinking about the nature of organizations, they offer a way of looking at schools as living systems through the exploration of the concept of the *'intelligent school'*.

For them, intelligent schools are “human communities that are continuously developing their capacity for improvement. They do this through the use of at least nine intelligences, which together create the ‘corporate intelligence’ of the school. In this way the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.” (p. 1) They have identified nine interdependent intelligences that they believe to be critical to organisational growth and improvement.

The nine intelligences that MacGilchrist et al have identified can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. The Nine Intelligences

1.	Ethical intelligence (EthQ)
2.	Spiritual intelligence (SQ)
3.	Contextual intelligence (CQ)
4.	Operational intelligence (OQ)
5.	Emotional intelligence (EQ)
6.	Collegial intelligence (CoQ)
7.	Reflective intelligence (RQ)
8.	Pedagogical intelligence (PQ)
9.	Systemic intelligence (SyQ)

They believe that each can be developed in order to maximise students’ effective learning – with an emphasis upon learning and not just performance. As well as identifying the intelligences they have organised them into three fundamental spheres of activity: vision; action and sustainability; and, connecting vision to action.

Vision:

- *Ethical:* being concerned with justice, respect, inclusion, rights and responsibilities;
- *Spiritual:* engaging in a search for meaning, transcendence, community and connectedness;

Action and Sustainability:

- *Contextual:* undertaking an appreciation of internal, local, national and global contexts;
- *Operational:* having a capacity to engage in strategic, development planning, management and distributed leadership;
- *Emotional:* having self awareness, awareness of others, managing emotions and developing emotional literacy;
- *Collegial:* seeking for shared purpose in creating multi-level learning, trust and curiosity¹;

¹ This intelligence is particularly salient in the context of our current orientation to an audit society (c/f. Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002)

- *Reflective*: accepting a need for self evaluation, feedback for learning, meta-evaluation and double loop learning;
- *Pedagogical*: perceiving new visions and goals for learning, teaching for learning, open classrooms, enhanced subject matter knowledge and curriculum expertise;

Connecting Vision to Action:

Systemic: being insightful of the need for being self-organising, joined up thinking, interdependence, having articulated mental models.

As Senge (1990, 2000a, 2000b and 2002) has argued for over ten years, to make the necessary connections between vision and action, is both challenging and rewarding. To do this kind of integrated work in a systematic way which enables the school to engage in continuous improvement is no easy matter. It requires insight to understand that the use of corporate intelligence ensures that the whole really is greater than the sum of the parts.

The intelligent school, then, is a learning school; students learn, teachers professionally learn and the organization learns. As Harris and Volet (1997) have observed there is now a significant body of literature which addresses workplace learning and its relationship to organisational change and development (p.28). Senge's (1990) book *The Fifth Discipline* gave voice to the concept of the learning organisation as a place where people are encouraged to learn together in ways which are fresh and innovative. While much of the advocacy for organisational learning had its genesis in business and commerce it can certainly be seen to be applicable to educational enterprises. The school, its practices and its culture, is to be seen then as the unit which is to professionally grow.

Leading the Intelligent School:

Leadership in the intelligent school is far more than organisational management it relates to honesty, compassion, strength, integrity, trust and wisdom. Goleman (2000) believes that leaders who are to be respected are self aware, self managing, socially aware and socially skilled and that each of these strengths can be developed. As he puts it: "like parenthood leadership will never be an exact science, but neither should it be a complete mystery to those who practice it. The literature on leadership is vast. However, a useful framework in which to consider leadership in and for the intelligent school can be found in the Western Australian Leadership Framework (2005) bounded by: attributes (fair, supportive, collaborative, decisive, flexible, tactful, innovative, persistent); values (learning, care, excellence, equity); and, knowledge (of pedagogy, curriculum, legislation, policies, change management, technologies and stakeholders).

All of this may seem so self evident. However, it is the last of these that has been most neglected in the leadership discussions, that is, in order to know about stakeholders, their needs and preferences, it is necessary to consult them, in particular the consequential stakeholders², the students themselves.

² A phrase first mooted by the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration.

Listening to Student Voice:

Schools exist to educate their students, but it is a curious thing that as the “consequential stakeholders” with respect to the many decisions that go into the organisation of schools, curriculum and assessment practices and the like, they are rarely consulted about what happens in their classrooms, in the playground and more generally in the ways in which the purposes of schooling are discussed. As Crane (2001) indicated in her portrayal of the *Students as Researchers* project at Sharnbrook Upper School and Community College in UK:

Not only can the students come to school to learn; but they can and indeed must be an integral part of the school’s own learning. Schools cannot learn how to become better places for learning without asking the students. (p.54).

I have now had the privilege of working on student voice projects in a number of schools, all of whom are members of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2003). Because these cases are unpublished I shall outline a selection of them rather than describe them in detail and have assigned each one a pseudonym. What is important is that in each case there was an emphasis, not only in consulting students, but actually engaging them in the research itself.

Case A - Maddison Fields

Maddison Fields is a large comprehensive government High School. Its staff were concerned about an apparent lack of engagement by the students in the more challenging and demanding aspects of the curriculum. A decision was taken to train senior students to undertake focus group discussions with younger students. Among the many questions asked were two related to questioning:

How do students respond when they are asked difficult and challenging questions?

The response to this query appeared to be mediated by the dynamics of the class. In some situations a “clever” response was put down by peers, making the respondent appear to be a “nerd”. In others, it was likely that the difficult question would be met by silence with students reluctant to “have a go”. “There was a sense of embarrassment and a sense of ‘being put on the spot’”. Students reported being intimidated in that they might provide the “wrong answer” and thus be subjected to both teacher and peer laughter. “There is sometimes teasing when the question is answered, but it depends on the class.”

How do teachers respond when the students ask difficult and challenging questions?

There was general agreement that they (the teachers) usually “shrug it off” or “avoid it if they don’t know the answer” or “they just walk away”. Again it was suggested that the response varied, depending upon the teacher and the mood that he or she was in. “Some will try to get the answer for the next lesson.” Or he or she may consult

another teachers. It also seemed that it depended on whether the teacher thought the students were challenging them “sometimes they just ignore (the students) even if they are being serious.” “Some teachers don’t answer because the teacher thinks the students are being ‘smart arses’”. One group made the point to the interviewers that “they want the teachers to find the answers.”

In subsequent discussions with staff it appeared that, for some, these insights by the students were quite unexpected. The point was that the responses provided an excellent launch pad for thinking about forms of questioning in the classroom.

Case B – Templeton Girls High School

Templeton Girls High School is as its name implies a government single sex secondary school. The school had been a successful grantee in working towards the development of a more comprehensive and inclusive academic care policy that took particular account of concerns around bullying. A student research advisory committee was convened with the students, Yrs 7 – 10 assisting in developing the research questions. Following the first phase of inquiry the students presented at a community forum that involved parents and community partners such as the local area police command. The discussion was vigorous and formed the basis for the development of a set of questions to be investigated this year.

Case C – Broadwood Boys High School

Concerned with the general view that the boys were on a self-ordained failure route the school decided to conduct a full day forum for all boys in years 7 – 10. Students were assigned to a multi-age group and each was provided with a folder in which to document responses. Year 10 boys were assigned the responsibility for the conduct of the groups. Each student was provided with a range of images of teachers (not their teachers) at work. Images were varied by age, gender, ethnicity and activity. Boys were asked to choose two of the eight images on the basis that they believed that the identified teachers would be ones who would help them to learn – they then provided an explanation for their response.

Students, in selecting an image of teachers who would best assist their learning, generally chose the images where teachers were seen to be providing good explanations³ and generally were available to help students by coaching, demonstrating and providing hands on learning activities. Below is a small selection of student comments:

I think I would learn better with this teacher because she is explaining well to the person. (Image 1)

I think that this teacher is the best because she doesn’t just teach she sits next to the children and explains their work. (Image 1)

³ The number of references in the discussion papers to ‘explaining’ mounted to several hundred overall.

This teacher explains something very well before making you do it. (Image 2)

This teacher looks like he is explaining some work to the students which is a good sign for the students. (Image 2)

He is very active with the work so that it doesn't make it boring. (Image 4)

I think that this teacher is the best one out of all the others because that he is actually showing them how to do the work and letting them have a turn later. (Image 4)

I have selected this teacher because in my opinion he is doing practical procedures which means that the students don't find it boring and can learn much better. (Image 4)

This one, mainly because the teacher is helping you through your work and you will learn a lot more out of it. (Image 5)

Students getting in pairs are the best ways of learning as students can share knowledge and teachers coming around and asking what we have learnt and adding additional information that students haven't covered or explain things in an easier way. (Image 5)

Working in pairs but also with the supervision of a teacher working in small groups are very effective since students are more free to ask questions to the teacher and also share information between peers. (Image 5)

I like this one because he is showing and explaining to the class, with him showing the class step by step. I like computers and his way of teaching. (Image 6)

This teacher because he is in a big classroom with not a lot of students. (Image 7)

This one will assist our learning because this picture is showing us how the teachers instruct and teach us. A teacher that is kind, cooperative. Someone who also gives us an example. A teacher who loves doing his job and is willing to sacrifice his time to help us with our work. (Image 8)

Case D- Aston Boys High School

Aston Boys' High School is an inner Western comprehensive school serving the needs of boys from a wide variety of different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. In common with a number of Sydney government secondary schools it conducts a selective stream for high ability students. The school has long been a

reference group for a museum that has an interest in finding out about student perspectives on learning, in school and in places such as museums. Only a small part of the inquiry is reported here as it is illustrative of this group of students views of learning and themselves as learners. The project also required the students to comment on the research processes themselves.

Eleven Year 9 students took part in the focus group interview, they were randomly selected from the selective stream. The purpose of the interview was explained and each boy completed a permission form.

In the case of the first two questions put to them students were shown an array of postcards depicting a 'nerd', dancing, going to the gym, a big question mark, 'change your world', and asked which one for them represented what it was like to learn in and out of school.

Learning in school is like: 5 boys selected the gym image, focusing particularly upon weight lifting. It was indicated that every year the work gets harder and "you lift a heavier load". Much of gym work is repetitive, as is school "but it builds up an ability to maintain wellbeing – the more you know the better it gets". "Exams are like bench pressing". Two students selected skateboarding, one because it is all a matter of balance, the other because it is "a long ride". Two boys chose 'change your world' on the grounds that school provides opportunities and is built on faith "you have to have the faith to go on". One boy selected the nerd image – "you kind of have to be a nerd, it's essential to learn"; finally one boy chose the big question mark, but preferred not to say why.

Learning out of school is like: The majority of boys selected skateboarding on the grounds that it was fun, that you can do "what it is you want to do", there is more choice, "you can go at your own pace", "you can quit when you want to", "you can make your own judgements about how well you are doing". Three chose the gym image and indicated that gym work was more self disciplined, "you can set your own targets, do as much as you can and want to do. It's also easier to give up". "Yeah, when it's too hard you can stop". Two selected 'change your world'. They believed that you develop ambition out of school.

All of the students indicated that they enjoyed using the cards.

How do you think of yourself as a learner? Draw yourself as a learner in Year 6 and now, what is different? Learning in Year 6 was generally portrayed as less demanding, more fun, less focused, more social and easygoing. Goals are short term, whereas in these middle years of High School the goals are more directed to the end point of schooling, the HSC. Clearly the curriculum and teaching is based on higher expectations and is at times, more stressful. Teachers expect a better performance. There are divergent paths for students to take and greater choice. As well there are more distractions "girls and puberty". One student contrasted primary school as

being a small cup that is treasured but easily filled, with secondary schooling a whirlwind moving at an ever-faster rate.

While the boys were more amused than reluctant regarding the request to draw, they indicated afterwards that “it was ok”, and that the process allowed people to look at things differently, “it was more personal somehow”.

These very abbreviated studies give us some insight into the variety of ways in which students might be consulted and engaged in school based inquiries. Work with primary students has also been effective, using images and drawings as a stimulus for student discussion.

Interestingly, it is not only in education that there is an increasing regard for consulting young people about the matters that they daily face. As in this last case, institutions such as museums are seeing young people as an important constituency with views and ideas about how the operation should be managed (Groundwater-Smith & Kelly, 2003). Councils are beginning to take into account young people’s views of their environment when developing their long-term plans (Cunningham, Jones and Dillon, 2003).

Conclusion:

Consulting young people means needing to know what is going on in their heads, essentially it is a constructivist strategy and entirely in keeping with contemporary theories of learning, learning about schools, learning about places and spaces, learning about learning itself. The intelligent school cannot fail but to benefit from consulting those whose lives it most affects – its students.

Closure:

A silent conversation using the Edward de Bono “Six Thinking Hats” Reflect upon what you have learned thus far about leading learning in intelligent schools and listening to student voice. Using the coloured hat sheets write your thoughts. You do not need to visit every hat, but try to contribute to at least three of them.

Each 'Thinking Hat' is a different style of thinking. These are explained below:

White hat: This is where you analyze past trends and try to relate to historical events;

Red hat: You look at problems using intuition, ‘gut reaction’ and emotion and also try to think how other people will react emotionally.

Black hat: Look at the challenges – be cautious and defensive, try to see what might be the weak points in the processes. This helps you to make your plans ‘tougher’ and more resilient.

Yellow hat: Think positively, This is the optimistic hat that helps you to see the benefits and values of the processes being used.

Green hat: This is where you develop creative solutions that take you ‘outside the box’.

Blue hat: This is where you think about processes; are they in place do they need changing or monitoring.

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