

A Response to Eleanor Denny

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Attend a conference of music educational researchers and you will have entered a field of enquiry concerned to understand and explain the issues and problems identified by those who move within the field of enquiry. The inhabitants of this realm sometimes speak of young people, sometimes reveal the ways in which they have consulted them, probed their ways of seeing and allowed their voice to speak. In rare circumstances the researcher may have negotiated a relationship involving a shared interest enabling the young person to work alongside them as co-enquirer. However, in general, social enquiry has been slow to move from treating young people as objects of enquiry to co-enquirer. The researcher will be speaking from a position of power with the authority to make legitimate some knowledge and not other. It is the adult researcher who poses the questions and presents the problems and who works in response to data and findings that accrue from the efforts of other adult researchers. Beyond this the adult researcher engages in research activities with a particular view of childhood, with a construct of how children are and in what ways they can inform an adult world. While childhood is of course a contested concept, it is suggested that the notion of child as dependent remains the most enduring and durable.

However, Eleanor Denny's research provides a vivid example of another way. Eleanor provides a way of understanding, explaining and solving the problems of music education, from an altogether different perspective. She joins a growing body of exciting and innovative work undertaken by young people. Pupils across the world are taking up the role of designers and evaluators of teaching programmes by involving themselves in action research where their insights are able to identify problems only dimly perceived by their teachers. There are young people taking on the task of training teachers, helping beginning teachers to understand better why young people are prevented from learning and why they sometimes behave badly, for example. And all this only becomes possible through the collection of data from their peers and through analysing their observations systematically made. In England the Inspection process routinely expects the insights of young people to inform school improvement. This recognition of young people's capacity to create valuable knowledge comes at the same time as a recognition that schools, their teachers, researchers and society in general are slow to acknowledge young people's social and intellectual maturity and the ways in which they are able to contribute to understanding and bring about improvement to school life and learning.

Eleanor is clear that she and not an adult is more able to empathise with those who participate in her research. In creating her questionnaire she is not willing to underestimate the capability of the pupils who will be responding to her questions. She points out too that her respondents are more likely to be open with people of their own age, that there is likely to be an easy rapport and empathy between researcher and researched, a level of empathy that would be impossible to replicate in an adult–pupil relationship. Here then is

the voice of those who have the greatest investment in education, not a voice mediated by an adult which by its nature must always be inauthentic. Eleanor writes:

... a child's perspective is evident in two ways. The questionnaire is written by a child and scored by a child. The list of possible parental tactics and the scores allocated to them were a young person's views. In terms of the participants, the child's perspective is not in the wording of the responses, but in how the child conveys their understanding of the situation through the answers they give. A parent completing the questions on behalf of their child might give a very different set of answers.

Eleanor's work shows her academic, communication and civic skills at work and in terms of research skills, Eleanor shows that she is able to:

- Identify important issues that need exploration
- Design a programme of research that will yield useful knowledge
- Analyse and question existing research evidence
- Devise schedules and questionnaires that provide valuable data
- Interpret and analyse data using a variety of strategies
- Write an articulate account of her work that is informative and stimulating

We of course recognise that Eleanor is working with adult guidance and, as an aspect of this, she is learning to respect mutual responsibilities with a more knowledgeable other.

While Eleanor's work connects with the growing movement referred to as 'pupil voice', what she has achieved here is almost certainly unique in terms of methodological rigour, awareness of limitations and potential flaws in her work and the overall level of self-reflection. These are all important aspects of research training that adults find hard to master. Eleanor's achievement is to be admired. Most importantly, Eleanor has created knowledge that is being shared and that needs to be shared not only through the *British Journal of Music Education* but with other young people, with whom she might envisage further research and with whom she might collaborate.

From the growing volume of evidence about young people in the role of researchers, we know that once embarked on this path they will become empowered to ask ever more interesting, challenging and sometimes uncomfortable questions. While it remains rare for a professional researcher to co-research with a classroom practitioner, rare for a classroom practitioner to become a researcher themselves, it might be possible, as a first step, for pupils to research with their teachers, together to identify the problems that are worth finding solutions to. This might rather more effectively become a means of changing the face of music education than current attempts through a top down and frequently paternalistic approach. Perhaps Eleanor has ignited a slow fuse.