ABSTRACT. Michael Fullan in 1991 made the comment that little was known about how students viewed educational change, as no one had thought to ask them. There is a small but growing literature seeking the views of students on a range of issues associated with schooling. This paper reports the findings of a study of students’ perceptions of top-down educational change, involving school amalgamations, closures and creation of middle schools. The policy process was purportedly to involve consultation with students. The study interviewed students to explore the nature and extent of their participation in the policy enactment and their views about the changes. Several meta level themes emerged from the students’ ‘voices,’ including issues associated with disempowerment, and competing social justice and economic discourses. The findings foreground the often messy and contradictory tensions evident in policy processes. The study found that despite the policy intent to include students, they continued to be the ‘objects’ of policy initiatives, submerged in what Freire labelled a ‘culture of silence.’ It was the macro level policy elite who exerted the most influence, using their power, privilege and status to propagate particular versions of schooling. The paper concludes that students are deeply impacted by educational change and they want to participate in restructuring agendas. Therefore policy makers at all levels need to make spaces for the active engagement of students in policy processes.

KEY WORDS: economic discourses, educational change, education policy, restructuring agendas, social justice discourses, student empowerment, student voice

ABBREVIATIONS: ATP – Academic Talent Program; EDWA – Education Department of Western Australia; LAEP – Local Area Education Planning; TAFE – College of Technical And Further Education; WA – Western Australia

1. INTRODUCTION

“We hardly know anything about what students think about educational change, because no one ever asks them” (Fullan, 1991, p. 182).

In an era of globalisation, marketisation and profound and ongoing change both within society and within education systems, there has been a growing awareness of the need to include young people in the change process. In 1991, Fullan made the observation quoted above, and three years later Nieto (1994) pointed to the deficit of research that included the student as participant. Miles (1998) in a
moment of whimsy wrote his vision for the year 2020, overviewing what should have been learned about educational change over the ensuing decades, and one of his key points was a need for an “increasing use of students as researchers on classroom practice (to play) a very strong part in both the reconceptualisation of teaching and the diffusion of practice” (p. 63). In the last few years there has been a small but growing literature, describing research that has included students talking about various aspects of their schooling (Fielding, 2001a). The research on which this article is based aimed to make a contribution to foregrounding the roles and responses of students in educational change. Specifically, it focuses on educational change associated with a ‘restructuring’ policy involving school closures, amalgamations and the creation of new schools. This particular paper stems from a larger project on student perceptions of educational change in the state of Western Australia (WA) in schools under the authority of the Department of Education. It reports the findings of a case study of education change in one school district. It did not use students as co-researchers but small groups of volunteer students were interviewed during and after the enactment of the policy ensemble. The policy processes, which led to substantial educational change, purportedly involved consultation with students.

Much educational change is about redefining roles involving shifts in power and responsibilities, between the different actors involved (Friedman, 1997). Yet, arguably, it is those in the policy elite who exert the most influence, using their power, privilege and status in order to sustain and propagate particular versions of schooling (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998), leaving students submerged in what Freire (1970) has termed a ‘culture of silence.’ Fullan (2001) has argued that students are usually excluded from both the processes and decision-making associated with change and that instead of being empowered by the changes; students become the “objects” of change, as Levin (2000) said, “objects to be worked upon rather than actors to be taken seriously.” One of the realities of student involvement in educational change is that their voices are often bracketed, when they are allowed to speak at all, they are more often viewed as silent, passive objects of change (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). As Levin (2000, p. 155) observed, “the history of education reform is a history of doing things to other people, supposedly for their own good.”

However, the power of the often silent majority can be used to subvert change (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992) and some studies indicate