Non-Compliance as a Substitute for Voice

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Non-Compliance as a Substitute for Voice

This article considers the effect that student-teacher relationships have on engagement with school and how students go about making their voice heard. In order to do this, it draws upon data from a year long ethnography in an underperforming school in England. The site was particularly useful in addressing these questions as it offered different types of educational provision to vocational and mainstream pupils. This contrast highlighted, in particular, the effects of different types of student-teacher relationships.

The works of Honneth, Cavarero and Couldry are used to theorise voice along with criticism of formal school voice procedures by writers such as Fielding. The failure of formal student voice processes were found to further disengage the participants from school. Effective voice depends on relationships based on mutual recognition and cannot be based on simple representation. For the participants in this study, non-compliance became a means by which to exercise voice.

Keywords: voice, non-compliance, ethnography

Introduction

Student voice in school is usually discussed in terms of democratic structures such as student councils and school policies tend to focus on developing these structures. However, this restricted view has tended to undermine the meaning and importance of student voice. Smyth and McInerney (2013) recognise that children growing up in problematic and marginalised contexts are often disconnected or disempowered by school systems incapable of accommodating them; not always through exclusion but by marginalisation. Listening to student voices is a process through which children’s inclusion and participation can be developed in a perpetually changing world (Czerniawski and Kidd 2011). However, children often believe that society in general does not want their voices to be heard (Aston and Lambert 2010) and Lumby (2012) identifies a tendency for either physical or mental withdrawal from education where...
student voice exerts little impetus for change.

This article uses data from a year-long ethnography to consider what effect student-teacher relationships have on pupil engagement and how students make their voice heard. To answer these questions, a theorisation of voice that is new to the context of compulsory education is elaborated below, enabling us to understand how student voice operates beyond the restrictive confines of democratic structures. It is argued that, in the absence of an effective means to be heard, non-compliant behaviour becomes a substitute for voice.

Literature Review

Theorising Voice

Defining voice as something that functions simultaneously within and beyond politics, Nick Couldry (2010) identifies its importance for human beings in giving an account of themselves and the place which they inhabit. This section will define exactly what is meant by voice, breaking it down into its constituent parts so that can we can analyse what is taking place in school. Firstly, there is the primary process of voice and the capacity to provide a narrative of one’s life and its circumstances. The second order of value pertaining to voice is possessing a voice that matters. Beyond these are the connection of voice to other normative frameworks and those practices that impede voice, determining some voices as viable and others as not (Couldry, 2010).

Couldry (2010) suggests that the primary process of voice is the capacity to provide a narrative of one’s life and its circumstances. For an individual to tell stories about their life is not simply a practical or symbolic action; it is an inherent aspect of the political process (Plummer 1995). Power is not monolithic, something that people either possess or do not. It is better conceived as a current which configures the extent to
which people experience control over their lives. It runs through lives, places, and networks of social activity and ‘the power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story, under the conditions of one’s own choosing, is part of the political process’ (Plummer 1995, 26). Adriana Cavarero suggests that a sense of self does not spring from narratives but rather from the desire to narrate. Even a ‘biography of discontinuous and fragmentary characters (even in the most radical “post-modern” sense) still ends up unable to flee from the unity, which, listening to the tale with the ear of its desire, is conferred upon it by the narratable self” (Cavarero 2000, 42). As a result, voice can be appreciated as the ‘process of giving an account of oneself’ (Couldry 2010, 3).

Young people in school will have the same desire to narrate their lives, establishing their own biography, and this is vital for them in order to establish a sense of self. This understanding of voice demonstrates something more fundamental than a need for political, democratic representation. Children need to articulate exactly who they think they are, the kind of person that they want to be.

In developing this theorisation of voice, it is useful at this point to consider Honneth’s concept of recognition (2007, 2012) as it highlights the importance of acknowledging the narrative accounts that people give of themselves in any fair social organisation. The word ‘recognition’ in German is indicative of conferring a positive sense of self-worth, whereas in English or French it can also mean to identify without the positive connotation. It is in the German sense of the word that Honneth (2007, 2012) uses recognition as he attempts to reconfigure critical theory by using norms and references from routine experience in specific historical epochs (Couldry 2010). He begins by suggesting that our intersubjective nature enables us to perform moral harm on one another through our words and actions. Building on this foundation, any understanding of justice should include opportunities for mutual recognition, as well as
the distribution of material wealth. Honneth identifies three distinct levels of recognition. Initially, a fundamental care for individuals for their own sake; following this, a reverence for an individual as a responsible moral agent; and finally an acknowledgment that a person’s abilities are of value to a community. Recognition is the driving force behind the formation of any group because we depend on the encouragement and affirmation that arises from social recognition, unable to uphold self-respect or self-esteem without the shared values or supportive experience of the group (Honneth 2012).

As Honneth (2007) acknowledges, recognition cannot be dissociated from institutional and social practice. Recognition is bound with the distribution of material resources and political representation and the three cannot be treated completely independently of one another. Nancy Fraser (2005) moves from the identity model of recognition to a model based on status. The identity model is based on the Hegelian belief that identity is constructed dialogically through mutual recognition and that one becomes a subject through acts of recognising and being recognised (Fraser 2000). In other words, voice must be both uttered and heard. To be deprived of recognition involves a misrepresentation of an individual’s relation to themselves and an injury to their identity. Supporters of this position map this onto the cultural and political spheres and insinuate that to be misrecognised is to belong to a group devalued by dominant culture. This elevates the importance of group identities and treats misrecognition as an independent cultural harm. By moving to a status model of recognition it is not the group identity but rather the status of individual group members that obliges recognition (Fraser 2000). Misrecognition then becomes not a distortion of group identity but rather social subordination through prevention from participating in social life as a peer. A claim for recognition is an attempt to be instituted as an equal in social life, interrelating
with others as peers. This links recognition to our broader understanding of voice in this
context and links quite clearly to Honneth’s third level of recognition (Couldry 2010).

Voice is socially grounded, requiring the practical resource of language as well
as the symbolic status required for recognition by others. Together these form the
materiality of voice and without these one cannot have voice (Couldry, 2010). Voice is
also a form of reflexive agency, linked to our broader actions in the world. This is not
naïve agency but involved with reflection and exchange of narrative between both
others and our own preceding and current selves (Harvey 2000; Cavarero 2000). Voice
articulates the world from a distinct position. A recognition of voice must understand
that voices are inherently different and must recognise that what is being said is
important, together with who is saying it (Cavarero 2005). It also requires an
appreciation that there is diversity within any one voice, as well as exterior differences
between voices and that moral injuries can occur across more than one dimension; for
example, by failing to credit that a child’s experience in the family home is relevant to
their journey through school. Voice requires a material form and it cannot occur without
the support of others (Butler 2005). If there is an unequal distribution of the material
resources of voice described previously then some members of a community have
limited control over what they can use to construct their account of themselves. This
constitutes a denial of their voice. When collective voice, or institutional decision
making do not credit individual experiences, such as when establishments fail to
acknowledge the voice of groups or when a society is organised on the premise that a
superior rationality has ultimate validity, voice is undermined. Voice can also be
undermined through simply not valuing voice or by obstructing alternate narratives.
This may not take the form of an outright denial but may work to weaken material voice
(Couldry 2010).
It is transparent from this theorisation of the process of voice that school authorities may inhibit the voice of their students by not allowing it material form. If young people in school are not provided with adequate opportunities to make themselves heard can they make themselves heard anyway?

**Empirical Studies on Student Voice**

Smyth and McInerney (2013) found that many school children disengage as a result of having no voice in shaping their school experience. These children form their identities in opposition to school, willing to sacrifice the deferred economic benefit that comes with educational credentials in order to create their identity in the present moment. However, research also shows that there are problems with democratic, participatory, approaches to student voice (Leitch and Mitchell 2007; Rudduck and Fielding 2006). The creation of democratic structures, including school councils, disguises the lack of trust between students and staff. The current inclination towards student voice can lead to its superficial observance, with structures enabling it to be heard without any reflective and critical thought as to why it should be listened to (Rudduck and Fielding 2006). When restricted to consultation, in the sense of simply asking for opinions, participation does not address the multifaceted concerns of young people. Percy-Smith (2006) found that the voices of young people represent a variety of different value systems and agendas to those of adults, resulting in an inevitable conflict. For adults and young people to interrelate and mutually participate, reflexive and reciprocal relationships need to be developed, leading to more cohesive communities. Student voice cannot be reduced to the simple imposition of democratic forms with no consideration of the deeper interaction between student and teacher.

In their review of research on pupil voice, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) identified that, for students, the personal and interpersonal dimensions of learning were
very important but tend to be disregarded and suppressed by issues of school performance. School pupils generally aspire to a positive appreciation of learning and of themselves as learners, desiring a sense of agency over their learning and an ability to contribute to improvements in teaching and learning. Engaging with these aspects of pupil voice has a significant impact on pupil engagement with school. However, some practice demonstrates that cynical attempts to co-opt voice for school performance purposes alone perpetuates the objectification of learners who become passive passengers on their journeys through school (Czerniawski and Kidd 2011). The policies adopted by many schools in order to pay lip service to the notion of student voice actually result in undermining the potential positive outcomes if it were implemented effectively. What children wish for is an increased sense of agency and control over their destinies. However, many schools enact policy that simply increases students’ awareness that this is not the case. Alongside this, Robinson & Taylor (2012) demonstrate how easily the voice of pupils is co-opted into dominant agendas in school. This allows the potential for delusion to set in with respect to the independence of student voice as this can easily become effectively scripted by adults (Mannion 2007) and a supposition of insight into the experience of children is as mistaken as its denial (Fielding 2007).

Having seen the weaknesses inherent in formal democratic student voice structures in school, we can now examine the effect of the relationships between pupils and teachers, since, as suggested previously, symbolic status in the classroom is a prerequisite of having an effective voice. Tisdall and Davis (2004) observed that the voices of children are more likely to be heard when supported by adults and consequently an alteration in the relationship between children and adults is an essential prerequisite of children’s participation. In a review of international research from the
last thirty years, McGrath and Bergen (2015) found that, as students progress through school, positive teacher-student relationships become increasingly influential whereas the actual quality of the majority of these relationships declined. These increasingly negative relationships are the expectation of both parties. However, when an unusually positive relationship is formed these are particularly powerful in promoting pro-social behaviour, engagement and reforming students’ beliefs about the possibilities of good relations with teachers. In the UK, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) found that a majority of pupils wanted to believe that school is for them but commonly consider that it belongs to their teachers and Mitra (2003) identified that a perception of students as clients by teachers contributes to a sense of distance between them.

Narin and Higgins (2011) examined an alternative education programme for excluded students which occupied a small building in a poor state of repair on an industrial area. The students in this research saw their new place of education as a refuge from antagonistic relationships in mainstream school. The staff in the programme were not like teachers and, we are told, became more like friends. Staff had the opportunity to establish in-depth social relationships, enabled in part by a high staff to student ratio. However, there were also some negative aspects to these relationships in that their new teachers were not qualified. This added to the students’ sense of alienation since they saw it as a continued separation from the kind of educational resources that their peers had access to. Similarly, Meo and Parker (2004) carried out ethnographic research in a pupil referral unit in the West Midlands, UK, in which teacher-pupil relationships were characterised by a more informal approach. They found that interrupting the cycle of exclusion necessitated a reformulation of the teacher-pupil relationship in order to include a degree of respect, solidarity and involvement which many pupils in the setting had not experienced previously.
There are suggestions here that differently defined teacher-student relationships may enable resistant children to engage more effectively with their day to day education. The fact that the students were not seen as being in a subordinate position means that they were better able to form effective relationships. This different style of affiliation between adult and child also enables students to understand school as being for them rather than being run in the interests of their teachers. These instances also make clear the power of forming positive relationships against expectations as described by McGrath and Bergen (2015).

Lumby (2012) also found that relationships with mentors were often contrasted with those of teachers. These relationships were often regarded as being more positive and of extreme importance to students. This relates back to the differences in relationships experienced in the studies conducted by Meo and Parker (2004) and Narin and Higgins (2011). Relationships that are characterised by care and valuing the individual students are crucial to educational success, particularly for those students who are experiencing disadvantage due to external factors. The young people in Lumby’s review (2012) frequently accepted that the fact that their education was a waste of time was, to an extent, their own fault. But they also cited systemic failures of curriculum, pedagogy and relationships. By taking responsibility for their failures, at least in part, they managed to maintain a belief in their own competence and allow a belief that there was hope for future success. This protected their self-esteem but prevented them from having an impact on a context which repeatedly failed them.

By drawing on the work of Couldry and others, voice has been conceptualised here as something more fundamental than just a means of democratic representation. People, including school children, have a deep-seated need to narrate their lives and give an account of themselves. On top of this, any society or institution organised in a
just fashion should include opportunities for mutual recognition; chances for all voices to be articulated and listened too. The empirical work drawn upon here demonstrates that a superficial approach to student voice is counter-productive. Providing pupils with sufficient status within school, through positive relationships with staff, to make their voices heard engages those pupils and allows a more positive path through their education. It is also clear from this empirical work that a failure to provide these opportunities can result in resistance to education, particularly for children from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The Present Study

Whilst it may not be possible, or desirable, for teachers and students to exist on a truly equal level, there is evidence that there are benefits to be had on both sides for greater prominence to be given to student voice; not simply through the creation of democratic structures that mirror liberal democratic representation, although this is important, but through the development of teacher-student relationships that give appropriate weight to student agency to allow students to take ownership of the direction of their education.

The work discussed in the previous section suggests that schools currently tend to take a superficial approach to the observance of student voice and that this may have a negative impact on student engagement. In order to build on this earlier work, a methodology was developed that focussed on answering two research questions:

- What effect do student-teacher relationships have on pupil engagement?
- How do students make their voice heard?

To address these questions, an approach was required that would enable the investigation of student voice in a specific context so that greater understanding of this complex issue could be cultivated. The following section considers the methodology
and methods adopted in order to address these questions regarding student-teacher relationships and the means by which disaffected students make their voice heard in a conventional educational setting.

Methodology

Ethnography was considered a useful approach to address the research questions as it values the irreducibility of human experience and can examine people’s feelings within the context of their community and wider structures (O’Reilly 2012). The approach implemented here was intended to bring to light the pupils’ perspective, not to give a full ethnographic description of the school including the views of the school staff and an analysis of school documentation. This design intentionally provides a very one-sided view of school processes since, as Foucault (1982) states, to understand how power operates we must investigate resistance. The alternative is simply to reinscribe the rationality of those who hold power. The margins are a position of exclusion, but they can also be a position of power and critique, exposing the relativity of established universal values (Shields 1991).

Data collection consisted of observations, interviews and walks with participants as well as photographic methods and photograph elicitation interviews to collect data. The findings presented here draw upon data from interviews carried out in several locations around the school, as well as some carried out on foot. Whilst no data from observations or the photographic exercises are presented here, incidents that were observed were used as prompts during the interviews. Photograph elicitation interviews also enabled reflection on aspects of experience that might not normally be considered in interviews (Rose 2007). Interviews were semi-structured (May 2001), enabling the participants to talk around themes using their own frames of reference, drawing on concepts and meanings with which they were conversant.
The research took place in a comprehensive school known locally as having significant behavioural problems; consistently at the bottom of local school league tables due to its students’ GCSE performance. According to the UK Government’s English indices of deprivation website, updated in 2015, the pupils of the school are largely drawn from an estate located in one of the 20% most deprived areas in the country. At the time of the study the school had recently become an academy, which is a state funded school free from local authority control.

One of the opportunities afforded by using this school as the research site was the different provision given to two groups of pupils. During year 10, a small group of particularly disaffected and disruptive students followed a curriculum distinct from that of the mainstream and were taught in a totally discrete area of the school. Despite this, they did share the same school day including break and lunch times. This became known as the vocational group and the remaining population were known as the mainstream. The mainstream group followed a largely conventional curriculum and were taught in an orthodox style. As the participants moved into year 11, the vocational group was expanded to include more students from the mainstream. This offered an opportunity to compare the extent to which the participants felt that their voice was heard in these two contexts. A purposive sampling strategy (Savin-Baden and Major 2013) generated a sample of 20 participants with 8 in the vocational group and 12 in the mainstream group. This imbalance did not represent the split between the two groups as the mainstream group was significantly bigger than the vocational group. The sample was structured in this way in order to examine the contrast between the staff/student relationships in the two groups and also to investigate non-compliant behaviour which was more prevalent in the vocational group rather than to faithfully represent the school.
as a whole. The field work began in February when the participants were in year 10 and continued until the February when they were in year 11.

A thematic analysis of the data was carried out using coding; assigning descriptive labels to fragments of the data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Strauss (1987) identifies a difference between codes derived from the literature and codes that arise in-vivo. The systematic use of in-vivo codes provides a ‘bottom up’ approach to the coding. In-vivo coding was used to group the data based on their contents rather than because they contrived to fit a predetermined scheme. This gave rise to the two thematically coherent findings sections presented here.

This project conformed to the ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011). No one was coerced into taking part in this research and everyone was made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage. This is a particularly important consideration when working with vulnerable groups such as children who are used to being given instructions by adults. Each participant signed a consent form demonstrating they understood what they were agreeing to take part in and the Ethics Committee at the researcher’s institution agreed to the research being carried out.

Findings

Unconventional Relationships

The contrast between the experiences of the vocational and mainstream groups was particularly clear in terms of the different experiences of teacher-student relationships. The relationships between students and teachers in the vocational group in Year 10 were significantly different to those witnessed elsewhere and there were a number of reasons for this. There was much more of a sense of being on the same level and working
together to achieve a common end than there was in a conventional classroom. The groups were smaller and they tended to learn by working on projects together, rather than through traditional didactic lessons. This gave rise to an affiliation that was based far more on mutual trust than on a power imbalance and, in turn, this difference meant that staff were not seen as ‘teachers’. It was common for the staff to be referred to by their first names, even those in more senior positions, and one TA was even referred to as ‘Nan’ because she was with them all the time. However, there was a distinction drawn between those staff that had a great deal of day to day contact with them and those that were more managerial. The managerial staff were considered as a part of the wider school system by the vocational students and as such they were not trusted in the same way. Much of this is evidenced in the quotation below.

Me: So do you prefer it in vocational to mainstream?
Several: Yeah
Jenna: Yeah, because, like, when you talk to, like, the adults in there, they're not like teachers. You can talk to them like a person.
Me: You think they're not like teachers?
Jenna: No. They're not like teachers.
Me: Are they teachers? How do you see them?
Jenna: One of 'ems a teacher, but they're not actually all teachers.
Chloe: Tanya 'n that go to university dunt they.
Elizabeth: Yeah, Tina, Josie, Becky.
Ella: Mike's at college or university. He's at one of the two.
Chloe: Yeah, but Mike’s classed as a teacher.

Mike was a former site manager who had become the principal teacher for the vocational group since the conversion to academy status. The difference between Mike, who was their main point of contact at school in Year 10, and the more senior teachers is also exemplified below. The students were keen to discuss Mike since he represented so much of what they liked about their school experience.
Martin: We like Mike. Mike’s probably the best teacher.
Me: Why’s that?
Martin: Coz ‘e don’t shout much.
Charlie: Mike, if you ask him to leave you alone for a few minutes and come back
he’ll do it.
Me: Ok. And why do you think that is?
Brandon: Coz ‘es chilled out. Not like them. Think they’re all hard.

Part of the reasoning for the depth of their relationships with their teachers in the
vocational stream was the belief that they acted as a line of defence against the wider
school and its processes. Mike, for example, was seen as defending them against actions
by the SLT in after school staff meetings.

Brandon: So you think Mike doesn’t do much for us, yeah, but when he’s in the
after school meetings, yeah, with Ern an’ that, yeah, he does stick up for us a lot.

Having drawn this distinction between the more senior teachers and the staff that the
vocational students had most day to day contact with, it is important to note that the
students highlighted another division between the senior staff working with them and
those in the broader school. This tranche of school staff was seen as being ‘on their
side’ to a greater extent than other ‘outsiders’.

As consequence of this atypical rapport with their teachers, where there was a
greater degree of trust, the vocational students believed that they caused much less
trouble than they would in a different context. However, they were still keen to
emphasise that they were prepared to be difficult for staff that they saw as being in a
position of power, particularly where they had little day to day contact, as with the head
teacher for example. This is illustrated here:

Jenna: We’re better and we don’t cause the adults in there shit because you actually
know they’ve got a personality and they treat you like an adult.
Me: And how does that compare to kids in mainstream?
Elizabeth: Like, I dunno, if they want something, they kick off right, but with us, we can…
Chloe: Unless we don't get what we want. With [headteacher] we kick off.
Elizabeth: We kick off, but not as bad as mainstream do. We don’t run round the school.

This is reminiscent of the findings by Narin and Higgins (2011) and Meo and Parker (2004) relating to the improvement of relationships with students placed in alternative education settings. The teachers almost becoming more like friends to the students and resetting their relationships with school staff. However, as these students moved into Year 11, less time was spent with Mike since many of their core subjects were delivered in more traditional classrooms. This was keenly felt by the vocational participants and something they reported on in interviews. Mike was identified as the individual who looked after them the most at school and when they had to spend time away from their tight knit group they were not happy about it, suggesting that part of the closeness of the relationship they had with him was down to a shared group identity.

Charlie: He's our number one teacher. In vocational only he used to teach us for every lesson and we used to love it! And now it’s... we’ve got at most a few hours...

The different form of association between staff and pupils in the vocational group across both years was apparent to mainstream students as well. They often stated that they would prefer that kind of approach taken to them and they similarly did not see those staff as ‘teachers’. One possible explanation offered for this was that the staff were more relaxed and provided more choices for students. It was also thought that those members of staff were there to support as well as teach, which was in contrast to their experience with their own teachers.

Deena: They’re more like lenient... not lenient...
Adam: In [vocational]? They're relaxed...
Deena: More relaxed and give you more opportunities. And choices.
Me: Are they like... like teachers? Do they behave the same?
Deena: No.
Me: What’s different about them?
Deena: Obviously they behave the same but they’re more I dunno how to explain it... How would you explain Becky an’ that?
Leah: They’re like just there for support... They’re not really a teacher or anything.
Deena: Yeah, they support you, they teach you an’ that but they support you.

The teachers who took the vocational group formed relationships with their students that were more akin to those relationships the students in Lumby’s (2012) study had with their mentors. These relationships were significant to those acutely vulnerable students that made up the original vocational group but were also viewed as ideal teacher-student relations by those who experienced more conventional relationships with their teachers.

Many of the members of the staff who were liked by students across the school were people who originated from the same area as them and this coincided to a large extent, but not entirely, with those staff who worked with the vocational students. The headteacher joined the school as it became an academy and had moved from a school that was located in a city about an hour’s drive away. She had brought a number of teachers with her who commuted, compounding the students’ view that the teachers were a different breed to them. The following quote shows the overlap regarding this view between members of the vocational group and the mainstream group.

Charlie: They are from [xxx]. Mike, lives round here coz he’s been to this school. Elizabeth: Most of the teachers that are in [vocational], like Tina, she grew up on this estate she knows how it is, she knows how to work the children. That’s why most of them like her. They like Mike and Tina coz they grew up here so I think that’s a big thing coz when we get all the snobby ones coming from [xxx] or whatever and they went to a different school and they turn round and are like ner ner ner...
Charlie: like, err at our school we didn’t behave like that...

Elizabeth: Yeah…

Charlie: Why don’t you go FUCKING BACK THERE THEN!!!
this would mean that they would lose the teachers they had developed such positive relationships with. Their expected reaction to this was one of increased disruption and rejection of their schooling.

From the beginning of Year 11, they felt that their concerns over the changes were justified and that their comfortable and safe world had been taken away from them.

Brandon: We've been thrown back into mainstream haven’t we really.
All: Yeah.
Brandon: We've had our own little group didn’t we. And then they've just quit that group, finished that group and put us back in mainstream.

As a result of this exposure they claimed that their behaviour had deteriorated and this certainly appeared to be borne out during observations. They had formed very strong bonds with a very specific and small group of teachers and they felt comfortable with this group. Breaking apart this sense of family had a huge impact on the students and their sense of identity and safety. They even made comments during interviews about the classrooms being bigger even though this was clearly not the case. The reality did not matter, it was their sense that everything had been distorted that led to these views. Where they had been reasonably engaged with the work they were doing in Year 10 they were now far more disruptive.

The vocational participants had experienced a positive change as they went into Year 10 and had formed effective working relationships with their teachers but as they went into Year 11 they were now exposed. Where they had been sheltered and allowed to form their own little community this was now open to view by the rest of the school and they felt threatened by this, as they had expected to be at the end of Year 10. Their non-compliance became much more overt and intentional as a result of this and they began to detach themselves from their education. As a result, the majority of them were
ultimately excluded. This highlights how vulnerable these students are and how
important the context of their education is; they had such a negative impression of
school previously and they had successfully been reengaged. The school had allowed
them to become comfortable and happy in their small family group and the result of its
removal was ultimately their total withdrawal from school.

This is congruent with the findings of Narin and Higgins (2011) and Meo and
Parker (2004) in that a reformulation of teacher-student relationships is key to the
reengagement of pupils from challenging backgrounds. Also, as McGrath and Bergen
(2015) discovered, the forming of these positive relationships in the light of prior
negative experience is particularly powerful. However, the alteration of the situation
that they were so comfortable with caused a significant emotional injury to these
already vulnerable students. What had begun as a very successful experiment with these
students had, through its expansion, exacerbated the kind of outcomes that might have
been expected in the first instance.

**Non-Compliance as a Substitute for Voice**

Having scrutinised the nature of the participants’ relationships with adults, I shall now
go on to look at how this related to their sense of a lack of formal voice within school.
The key quotation below shows that their frequent refusal to comply with the
expectations of school authorities was intimately linked with a lack of mutual
recognition in the sense discussed earlier. Their view was that their non-compliance was
more powerful than their teachers’ systemic power.

> We are in charge, they might have the name by their head, like Principal and all
> that shit, but we're in charge of the school. The school is mainly for running
> education and everything if we can’t be fucked to do our education, they’re not ...
> We're in charge of the school coz they’re not doing their jobs properly. Of
educating us. If we can’t be fucked and say nah mate, I’m not doing any work, all that shit, like we normally do... We're in charge coz we're saying no. They might say, come on, come on, come on but in the end we're in charge of what we do.

Charlie

In discussions, participants always had very clear ideas about the direction they would like their school life to take, particularly across three key areas; learning, the uniform and the nature of the school building. They were very vocal about their preference for practical learning, independent and personalised learning as well as the restrictions that were placed on their subject choices. As far as the uniform went their distaste for blazers was clear and they desperately wanted a return to wearing the type of jumpers that they had worn previously. They also had many thoughts and opinions about the approach that should be taken towards the new building and its layout, some of these more realistic than others. It is important to make this point to demonstrate that the students were not just mindlessly rebelling with no clear idea of what they would prefer. It may not have been consistently realistic or attainable but they did have a clear sense of a different direction for key aspects of their education. However, due to the lack of recognition between them and their teachers their voice was not heard.

There was a pervasive sense that they had extremely little influence over the decision-making processes in the school. The participants clearly gave the impression that if their thoughts were heard and responded to they would be prepared to accept a different outcome. One particularly good example of their views being ignored was with respect to the uniform, their frustrations being clear in this exchange:

Esther: With the uniforms we all had our say on what uniform we wanted and she said something completely different.
Jenni: Yeah, none of us even said any of this.
Esther: No, none of us said nothin’ like this.
Deena: Yeah, but the whole school chose what they wanted but I wasn't there at that time that they said it as well, now we've heard it before and [headteacher] don’t change nothin’. She just thinks her own mind.

Esther: She just did this...

Jenni: Yeah, but if she... if... if... if... we weren't here then she wouldn’t have a school. So she should take up our opinions.

Deena: Yeah, coz she's not the one that’s learning here... she’s just runnin’ it... she doesn’t have to sit in the class room 6 hours a day...

The participants’ justification for having their voice heard is also apparent here. Their perspective was that the staff and the head might be responsible for managing the school but they were the ones for whom it was being run and as such they should have more of a say in its decision making processes.

As in many schools, there was a student council in place known as ‘student voice’. Students were elected on to this through tutor groups and there were year councils that in turn elected representatives on the school council. However, the participants could see no benefit from participating. There was a recognition that whatever the senior leadership wanted to happen would happen and there was little point in trying to do anything about it. The perception of student voice was that it was the school paying lip service to gathering their opinions whilst nothing would change in reality. This coincides with Fielding’s (2004) suggestion that much student voice work is predestined to fail since it simply strengthens and emphasises the suppression of pupils. The following exchange highlights this well, making it clear that the students are aware that school staff will simply get what they want.

James: Student voice. ‘N’ all that. You go to tell ‘em what to do ‘n’ they don't listen.

Mark: An’ they don't even do it.

Simon: I've been put up for that, so if I get voted for I've gotta wear a red shirt! But I don’t wanna wear it.
James: They're not gonna listen. If [headteacher] don’t want something, she don’t have it.
Mark: She's like, ‘Oo yeah, we're all listening to you, what you want, you say what you want.’ And she won’t ‘ave it.
James: She'll only have what she wants.... nah it’s too much or something like that. So it’s a load of bollocks.

In fact, one participant had been a member of the student council at one point in the past, having been encouraged by the notion that he might be able to change the school. However, it quickly became clear to him, he said, that nothing was really going to happen.

Adam: Yeah, I did, but then when I actually joined nobody would actually listen to what you were saying. Coz they were like, join, join, join you can change the school, I had a few ideas, join and then ‘nah, we can’t do that’. So I just started going for the food.

Participation in student voice was also offered as a remedy for behaviour on occasion. The response demonstrated in the following exchange was also indicative of how dismissive the participants were of the idea.

Jenni: You're going to laugh.... Apparently, I’m uncontrollable.
[Laughter]
Me: Who said that?
Jenni: All the teachers.... Tina wants to give me a home visit. She wants to take me out for a meeting for like 2 hours and they want to give me like more responsibility in the school, like...
Elizabeth: Student voice. (Laughing)
Jenni: I said that I'm NOT doing that... have a laugh...

As Robinson and Taylor (2012) describe, student voice is easily co-opted into representing dominant agendas. There was a prevalent idea that people who took part were not like the rest of the student community, adding to the detachment not only
between them and any decision-making processes but between them and anyone
involved in that process.

Deena: I don’t speak to student voice, they're a bunch of goons.
Jenni: Yeah, they are actually a bunch of goons.

This builds on previous work on student voice that suggests that the creation of
democratic structures is not a sufficient condition for student voice to be heard. Not
only does an effective student voice depend on the quality of relationships with
teachers, it depends on students being provided with an understanding of the manner in
which a representative democracy should work. Building on this detachment, the
students came to see their behaviour in school as a route to power. Recognising that
they held some power, even if the distribution of it was one sided, their misbehaviour
was a means by which to exercise that power and gain control over their lives at school,
offering a sense of control that was missing through legitimate means. This took two
forms. Firstly, a rejection of the education, or at least parts of the education, that was on
offer to them. This is effectively expressed as a refusal of a right to something that they
wanted but was simply not offered in an appropriate form here:

Charlie: The law says we've got a right to an education, but it’s our right to say
whether we're going to do it or not. So if we're sitting down and piss arse about
then it’s our right to be saying we don’t want to

Secondly, they viewed their misbehaviour as a means by which to retaliate as a result of
their treatment in school as evidenced here:

Me: When you misbehave is it wrong?
Jenni: No! It’s payback! I think it’s payback.
Mark: It’s fair enough…
Jenni: Yeah, it’s fair enough coz they shout at us all the time! So it’s payback.
Me: So you think it’s what you should be doing?
Jenni: No... It’s obviously not right, but they’re ... like... our mums and that think teachers are something that they’re not. If they were sat in school... If we had a camera attached to us for the day and we showed it, I think they’d be so shocked. Coz when like at teacher meetings, they’re just hypocrites.

This exercising of their power meant that they were gaining control over the way the school operated and allowed them, to some extent, to shape it in the way they wished it to be. Their non-compliance had become a substitute for the voice that they wanted to have within the school and through this could force themselves to be heard.

Discussion

Recognition as Central to Fruitful Relationships

As this study has sought to illustrate, mutual recognition is key to the development of voice and student-teacher relationships are fundamental to the manner in which students engage with school. The nature of the separate vocational and mainstream groups and the subsequent expansion of the vocational group in this study offered a good opportunity to compare different styles of teacher-student relationship. The key to the creation of relationships that engage students is mutual recognition. This has two levels. Firstly, teachers that students are with on a day to day basis are a vital point of contact and the degree of recognition between these groups has an immediate effect on engagement. A second issue is the degree of recognition between students and the wider school community. The lack of such recognition was one of the reasons for the longer-term failure of the vocational students to remain engaged with the school.

The changes in the educational setting that the vocational group was exposed to reveal that recognition is a key attribute in creating productive relationships between school staff and students. The improvements in relationships that occurred between staff and students in the Year 10 vocational group suggest that there is an escalation in the
recognition between students and staff in this context (Honneth 2007, 2012). This is a
two-way occurrence with both parties becoming recognised as individuals with unique
narratives. However, they were still stigmatised by the bulk of the school staff, even
though the staff they encountered day to day were perceived as being on their side. This
reveals two aspects of recognition within school; the mutual recognition by the staff
encountered on an everyday basis and the lack of recognition from the wider school
community. The members of the vocational group were able to engage as peers with
their immediate teaching staff, whilst being socially subordinated through being
prevented from engaging in social life as a peer elsewhere. The anxiety at the end of
Year 10 around the insertion of others into the vocational group signified a betrayal of
this recognition between the students and their teachers. This meant that the poor
outcomes that might have initially been expected for this group became exacerbated and
in due course led to their almost total isolation from the school community.

This can be contrasted with the nature of relationships outside of the vocational
group and the difficulty in establishing genuine recognition between groups with
relatively few shared values without any mechanism to enable such recognition. The
desire for recognition is the driving force behind group formation (Honneth 2012) and
in order to maintain self-respect and self-esteem the students grouped in opposition to
their teachers, in contrast with what occurred in the vocational group.

The Façade of Formal Voice Processes

The failure of formal student voice processes acted to further disengage the participants
from school, facilitating the belief that school was not run in their interests. Effective
voice depends on relationships based on mutual recognition and cannot be based on
simple representation. The students in the study understood that teachers had something
to offer them, but for this to be effective it required them to be heard on all levels. In the
absence of their voices being listened to, students resist aspects of the education process in order to gain resources to enable themselves to narrate their lives and be heard.

The existence of the student council in the school paid lip service to the notion of voice but in reality whatever the leadership of the school wished to happen happened. This process, co-opting the opinions of the student body into the dominant agenda, ultimately emphasised the suppression of the pupils. The lack of status that the participants had within school meant that it was impossible for them to give a true account of themselves within school. As a result of this, student voice was denied, obstructing alternative, student driven, narratives. The participants recognised that the staff were responsible for managing the school but also felt that they were the ones in whose interests it should be run and therefore they should have a say in its decision-making processes. The staff of the school were identified as a superior rationality that had ultimate validity (Couldry 2010) and the school was organised on this premise, undermining the voice of the students in the school.

The formation of democratic structures is not a sufficient condition for the voice of students to be heard. The quality of relationships is the foundation of effective voice. As described in the section on recognition, people become subjects through recognising and being recognised, i.e. through the dialogic nature of voice. The change in affiliations between pupils and teachers in the vocation group in year 10 clearly shows this. Honneth (2007) identifies that democracy is a social rather than a solely political ideal, it cannot be simply reduced to a representative process. Genuine democracy is the experience that the entirety of a given society could succeed through communally recognising one another. Recognition is the key element to the production of the good relationships that are the prerequisite of effective student voice, specifically Honneth’s (2012) third level of recognition whereby an individual’s abilities are recognised as
being of inherent worth to their community. This is key to the findings of Percy-Smith (2006) and also explains much of what can be seen in the current study.

The participants grasped that their school life cannot be just as they imagined it, demonstrating an informal understanding that voice is inconceivable as anything other than an open-ended exchange of narratives with others. Although obviously not expressed in these terms, they are not naïve about their agency, but rather understand that voice is a reflexive agency involving the need to understand what others say and also who is saying it (Cavarero 2005). In other words, they understand that the experience and knowledge of their teachers is important and useful to them and they wish to benefit from it. However, this knowledge and experience needs to be made relevant to them through the lens of their own knowledge and experience.

Ultimately, non-compliance becomes a means by which to exercise voice. This resistance contests power, reaching beyond the reactive and private, becoming political (Bright 2011). By rejecting aspects of education that the participants felt were inappropriate for them they demonstrate their desire to form a sense of self through narrating their own lives (Cavarero 2000). Resistance comes about through the desire to gain the material resources required to narrate lives and to do so beyond the restrictions of school. This represents a desire for true recognition as individuals capable of decision-making.

Conclusion

The relationships with teachers that the participants experienced were central to their education. The recognition that they desired through these relationships precedes any effective student voice procedures. Although there were effective relationships in the vocational group these were undermined and delegitimised by the school authorities. Relations between teachers and their students need to be rethought, moving beyond...
behaviour management into something more reciprocal. If the democratic public sphere is the medium through which a society manages and resolves its problems (Honneth 2007) then children’s voices are effectively excluded from this. In which case, whose problems are being addressed? One could very easily argue that it is the teachers’ problems and the issues caused for them by mandates from central government such as league tables. This raises a broader point as to whether all pupils are at the heart of teachers’ practice or whether there is a focus on those who will comply with the expectations of society, relegating others to the status of a problem to be solved.

It is clear from this that good relationships with teachers are a vital prerequisite to having voice as a student. Whilst democratic structures are important, they are not the ‘be all and end all’ of this process and there is a danger that the absence of voice at a more basic level may reinforce a lack of agency in school. Young people know they cannot have everything they want and would accept compromise were their voices heard and school staff showed a willingness to cooperate with them. However, ultimately the desire for this agency manifests itself as non-compliance and a refusal to accept things as they are.

References


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