



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

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

24 *Theorising Voice*

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26 Defining voice as something that functions simultaneously within and beyond politics,
27 Nick Couldry (2010) identifies its importance for human beings in giving an account of
28 themselves and the place which they inhabit. This section will define exactly what is
29 meant by voice, breaking it down into its constituent parts so that we can analyse
30 what is taking place in school. Firstly, there is the primary process of voice and the
31 capacity to provide a narrative of one's life and its circumstances. The second order of
32 value pertaining to voice is possessing a voice that matters. Beyond these are the
33 connection of voice to other normative frameworks and those practices that impede
34 voice, determining some voices as viable and others as not (Couldry, 2010).
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49 Couldry (2010) suggests that the primary process of voice is the capacity to
50 provide a narrative of one's life and its circumstances. For an individual to tell stories
51 about their life is not simply a practical or symbolic action; it is an inherent aspect of the
52 political process (Plummer 1995). Power is not monolithic, something that people either
53 possess or do not. It is better conceived as a current which configures the extent to
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3 which people experience control over their lives. It runs through lives, places, and
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5 networks of social activity and ‘the power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story,
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7 under the conditions of one’s own choosing, is part of the political process’ (Plummer
8
9 1995, 26). Adriana Cavarero suggests that a sense of self does not spring from
10
11 narratives but rather from the desire to narrate. Even a ‘biography of discontinuous and
12
13 fragmentary characters (even in the most radical “post-modern” sense) still ends up
14
15 unable to flee from the unity, which, listening to the tale with the ear of its desire, is
16
17 conferred upon it by the narratable self’ (Cavarero 2000, 42). As a result, voice can be
18
19 appreciated as the ‘process of giving an account of oneself’ (Couldry 2010, 3).
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24 Young people in school will have the same desire to narrate their lives,
25
26 establishing their own biography, and this is vital for them in order to establish a sense
27
28 of self. This understanding of voice demonstrates something more fundamental than a
29
30 need for political, democratic representation. Children need to articulate exactly who
31
32 they think they are, the kind of person that they want to be.
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36 In developing this theorisation of voice, it is useful at this point to consider
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38 Honneth’s concept of recognition (2007, 2012) as it highlights the importance of
39
40 acknowledging the narrative accounts that people give of themselves in any fair social
41
42 organisation. The word ‘recognition’ in German is indicative of conferring a positive
43
44 sense of self-worth, whereas in English or French it can also mean to identify without
45
46 the positive connotation. It is in the German sense of the word that Honneth (2007,
47
48 2012) uses recognition as he attempts to reconfigure critical theory by using norms and
49
50 references from routine experience in specific historical epochs (Couldry 2010). He
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52 begins by suggesting that our intersubjective nature enables us to perform moral harm
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54 on one another through our words and actions. Building on this foundation, any
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56 understanding of justice should include opportunities for mutual recognition, as well as
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3 the distribution of material wealth. Honneth identifies three distinct levels of
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5 recognition. Initially, a fundamental care for individuals for their own sake; following
6
7 this, a reverence for an individual as a responsible moral agent; and finally an
8
9 acknowledgment that a person's abilities are of value to a community. Recognition is
10
11 the driving force behind the formation of any group because we depend on the
12
13 encouragement and affirmation that arises from social recognition, unable to uphold
14
15 self-respect or self-esteem without the shared values or supportive experience of the
16
17 group (Honneth 2012).
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21 As Honneth (2007) acknowledges, recognition cannot be dissociated from
22
23 institutional and social practice. Recognition is bound with the distribution of material
24
25 resources and political representation and the three cannot be treated completely
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27 independently of one another. Nancy Fraser (2005) moves from the identity model of
28
29 recognition to a model based on status. The identity model is based on the Hegelian
30
31 belief that identity is constructed dialogically through mutual recognition and that one
32
33 becomes a subject through acts of recognising and being recognised (Fraser 2000). In
34
35 other words, voice must be both uttered and heard. To be deprived of recognition
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37 involves a misrepresentation of an individual's relation to themselves and an injury to
38
39 their identity. Supporters of this position map this onto the cultural and political spheres
40
41 and insinuate that to be misrecognised is to belong to a group devalued by dominant
42
43 culture. This elevates the importance of group identities and treats misrecognition as an
44
45 independent cultural harm. By moving to a status model of recognition it is not the
46
47 group identity but rather the status of individual group members that obliges recognition
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49 (Fraser 2000). Misrecognition then becomes not a distortion of group identity but rather
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51 social subordination through prevention from participating in social life as a peer. A
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53 claim for recognition is an attempt to be instituted as an equal in social life, interrelating
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3 with others as peers. This links recognition to our broader understanding of voice in this
4 context and links quite clearly to Honneth's third level of recognition (Couldry 2010).
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8 Voice is socially grounded, requiring the practical resource of language as well
9 as the symbolic status required for recognition by others. Together these form the
10 materiality of voice and without these one cannot have voice (Couldry, 2010). Voice is
11 also a form of reflexive agency, linked to our broader actions in the world. This is not
12 naïve agency but involved with reflection and exchange of narrative between both
13 others and our own preceding and current selves (Harvey 2000; Cavarero 2000). Voice
14 articulates the world from a distinct position. A recognition of voice must understand
15 that voices are inherently different and must recognise that what is being said is
16 important, together with who is saying it (Cavarero 2005). It also requires an
17 appreciation that there is diversity within any one voice, as well as exterior differences
18 between voices and that moral injuries can occur across more than one dimension; for
19 example, by failing to credit that a child's experience in the family home is relevant to
20 their journey through school. Voice requires a material form and it cannot occur without
21 the support of others (Butler 2005). If there is an unequal distribution of the material
22 resources of voice described previously then some members of a community have
23 limited control over what they can use to construct their account of themselves. This
24 constitutes a denial of their voice. When collective voice, or institutional decision
25 making do not credit individual experiences, such as when establishments fail to
26 acknowledge the voice of groups or when a society is organised on the premise that a
27 superior rationality has ultimate validity, voice is undermined. Voice can also be
28 undermined through simply not valuing voice or by obstructing alternate narratives.
29 This may not take the form of an outright denial but may work to weaken material voice
30 (Couldry 2010).
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3 It is transparent from this theorisation of the process of voice that school
4 authorities may inhibit the voice of their students by not allowing it material form. If
5 young people in school are not provided with adequate opportunities to make
6 themselves heard can they make themselves heard anyway?
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13 ***Empirical Studies on Student Voice***

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16 Smyth and McInerney (2013) found that many school children disengage as a result of
17 having no voice in shaping their school experience. These children form their identities
18 in opposition to school, willing to sacrifice the deferred economic benefit that comes
19 with educational credentials in order to create their identity in the present moment.
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21 However, research also shows that there are problems with democratic, participatory,
22 approaches to student voice (Leitch and Mitchell 2007; Rudduck and Fielding 2006).
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24 The creation of democratic structures, including school councils, disguises the lack of
25 trust between students and staff. The current inclination towards student voice can lead
26 to its superficial observance, with structures enabling it to be heard without any
27 reflective and critical thought as to why it should be listened to (Rudduck and Fielding
28 2006). When restricted to consultation, in the sense of simply asking for opinions,
29 participation does not address the multifaceted concerns of young people. Percy-Smith
30 (2006) found that the voices of young people represent a variety of different value
31 systems and agendas to those of adults, resulting in an inevitable conflict. For adults and
32 young people to interrelate and mutually participate, reflexive and reciprocal
33 relationships need to be developed, leading to more cohesive communities. Student
34 voice cannot be reduced to the simple imposition of democratic forms with no
35 consideration of the deeper interaction between student and teacher.
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58 In their review of research on pupil voice, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007)
59 identified that, for students, the personal and interpersonal dimensions of learning were
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3 very important but tend to be disregarded and suppressed by issues of school
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5 performance. School pupils generally aspire to a positive appreciation of learning and of
6
7 themselves as learners, desiring a sense of agency over their learning and an ability to
8
9 contribute to improvements in teaching and learning. Engaging with these aspects of
10
11 pupil voice has a significant impact on pupil engagement with school. However, some
12
13 practice demonstrates that cynical attempts to co-opt voice for school performance
14
15 purposes alone perpetuates the objectification of learners who become passive
16
17 passengers on their journeys through school (Czerniawski and Kidd 2011). The policies
18
19 adopted by many schools in order to pay lip service to the notion of student voice
20
21 actually result in undermining the potential positive outcomes if it were implemented
22
23 effectively. What children wish for is an increased sense of agency and control over
24
25 their destinies. However, many schools enact policy that simply increases students'
26
27 awareness that this is not the case. Alongside this, Robinson & Taylor (2012)
28
29 demonstrate how easily the voice of pupils is co-opted into dominant agendas in school.
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31 This allows the potential for delusion to set in with respect to the independence of
32
33 student voice as this can easily become effectively scripted by adults (Mannion 2007)
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35 and a supposition of insight into the experience of children is as mistaken as its denial
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37 (Fielding 2007).
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44 Having seen the weaknesses inherent in formal democratic student voice
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46 structures in school, we can now examine the effect of the relationships between pupils
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48 and teachers, since, as suggested previously, symbolic status in the classroom is a
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50 prerequisite of having an effective voice. Tisdall and Davis (2004) observed that the
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52 voices of children are more likely to be heard when supported by adults and
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54 consequently an alteration in the relationship between children and adults is an essential
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56 prerequisite of children's participation. In a review of international research from the
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3 last thirty years, McGrath and Bergen (2015) found that, as students progress through
4 school, positive teacher-student relationships become increasingly influential whereas
5 the actual quality of the majority of these relationships declined. These increasingly
6 negative relationships are the expectation of both parties. However, when an unusually
7 positive relationship is formed these are particularly powerful in promoting pro-social
8 behaviour, engagement and reforming students' beliefs about the possibilities of good
9 relations with teachers. In the UK, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) found that a majority
10 of pupils wanted to believe that school is for them but commonly consider that it
11 belongs to their teachers and Mitra (2003) identified that a perception of students as
12 clients by teachers contributes to a sense of distance between them.
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26 Narin and Higgins (2011) examined an alternative education programme for
27 excluded students which occupied a small building in a poor state of repair on an
28 industrial area. The students in this research saw their new place of education as a
29 refuge from antagonistic relationships in mainstream school. The staff in the
30 programme were not like teachers and, we are told, became more like friends. Staff had
31 the opportunity to establish in-depth social relationships, enabled in part by a high staff
32 to student ratio. However, there were also some negative aspects to these relationships
33 in that their new teachers were not qualified. This added to the students' sense of
34 alienation since they saw it as a continued separation from the kind of educational
35 resources that their peers had access to. Similarly, Meo and Parker (2004) carried out
36 ethnographic research in a pupil referral unit in the West Midlands, UK, in which
37 teacher-pupil relationships were characterised by a more informal approach. They found
38 that interrupting the cycle of exclusion necessitated a reformulation of the teacher-pupil
39 relationship in order to include a degree of respect, solidarity and involvement which
40 many pupils in the setting had not experienced previously.
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3 There are suggestions here that differently defined teacher-student relationships
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5 may enable resistant children to engage more effectively with their day to day
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7 education. The fact that the students were not seen as being in a subordinate position
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9 means that they were better able to form effective relationships. This different style of
10
11 affiliation between adult and child also enables students to understand school as being
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13 for them rather than being run in the interests of their teachers. These instances also
14
15 make clear the power of forming positive relationships against expectations as described
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17 by McGrath and Bergen (2015).
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21 Lumby (2012) also found that relationships with mentors were often contrasted
22
23 with those of teachers. These relationships were often regarded as being more positive
24
25 and of extreme importance to students. This relates back to the differences in
26
27 relationships experienced in the studies conducted by Meo and Parker (2004) and Narin
28
29 and Higgins (2011). Relationships that are characterised by care and valuing the
30
31 individual students are crucial to educational success, particularly for those students
32
33 who are experiencing disadvantage due to external factors. The young people in
34
35 Lumby's review (2012) frequently accepted that the fact that their education was a
36
37 waste of time was, to an extent, their own fault. But they also cited systemic failures of
38
39 curriculum, pedagogy and relationships. By taking responsibility for their failures, at
40
41 least in part, they managed to maintain a belief in their own competence and allow a
42
43 belief that there was hope for future success. This protected their self-esteem but
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45 prevented them from having an impact on a context which repeatedly failed them.
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51 By drawing on the work of Couldry and others, voice has been conceptualised
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53 here as something more fundamental than just a means of democratic representation.
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55 People, including school children, have a deep-seated need to narrate their lives and
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57 give an account of themselves. On top of this, any society or institution organised in a
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3 just fashion should include opportunities for mutual recognition; chances for all voices
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5 to be articulated and listened too. The empirical work drawn upon here demonstrates
6
7 that a superficial approach to student voice is counter-productive. Providing pupils with
8
9 sufficient status within school, through positive relationships with staff, to make their
10
11 voices heard engages those pupils and allows a more positive path through their
12
13 education. It is also clear from this empirical work that a failure to provide these
14
15 opportunities can result in resistance to education, particularly for children from low
16
17 socio-economic backgrounds.
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23 **The Present Study**

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25 Whilst it may not be possible, or desirable, for teachers and students to exist on a truly
26
27 equal level, there is evidence that there are benefits to be had on both sides for greater
28
29 prominence to be given to student voice; not simply through the creation of democratic
30
31 structures that mirror liberal democratic representation, although this is important, but
32
33 through the development of teacher-student relationships that give appropriate weight to
34
35 student agency to allow students to take ownership of the direction of their education.
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40 The work discussed in the previous section suggests that schools currently tend
41
42 to take a superficial approach to the observance of student voice and that this may have
43
44 a negative impact on student engagement. In order to build on this earlier work, a
45
46 methodology was developed that focussed on answering two research questions:
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- 49 • What effect do student-teacher relationships have on pupil engagement?
- 50
- 51 • How do students make their voice heard?
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56 To address these questions, an approach was required that would enable the
57
58 investigation of student voice in a specific context so that greater understanding of this
59
60 complex issue could be cultivated. The following section considers the methodology

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3 and methods adopted in order to address these questions regarding student-teacher
4 relationships and the means by which disaffected students make their voice heard in a
5 conventional educational setting.
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10 11 **Methodology**

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14 Ethnography was considered a useful approach to address the research questions as it
15 values the irreducibility of human experience and can examine people's feelings within
16 the context of their community and wider structures (O'Reilly 2012). The approach
17 implemented here was intended to bring to light the pupils' perspective, not to give a
18 full ethnographic description of the school including the views of the school staff and an
19 analysis of school documentation. This design intentionally provides a very one-sided
20 view of school processes since, as Foucault (1982) states, to understand how power
21 operates we must investigate resistance. The alternative is simply to reinscribe the
22 rationality of those who hold power. The margins are a position of exclusion, but they
23 can also be a position of power and critique, exposing the relativity of established
24 universal values (Shields 1991).
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39 Data collection consisted of observations, interviews and walks with participants
40 as well as photographic methods and photograph elicitation interviews to collect data.
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42 The findings presented here draw upon data from interviews carried out in several
43 locations around the school, as well as some carried out on foot. Whilst no data from
44 observations or the photographic exercises are presented here, incidents that were
45 observed were used as prompts during the interviews. Photograph elicitation interviews
46 also enabled reflection on aspects of experience that might not normally be considered
47 in interviews (Rose 2007). Interviews were semi-structured (May 2001), enabling the
48 participants to talk around themes using their own frames of reference, drawing on
49 concepts and meanings with which they were conversant.
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3 The research took place in a comprehensive school known locally as having
4 significant behavioural problems; consistently at the bottom of local school league
5 tables due to its students' GCSE performance. According to the UK Government's
6 English indices of deprivation website, updated in 2015, the pupils of the school are
7 largely drawn from an estate located in one of the 20% most deprived areas in the
8 country. At the time of the study the school had recently become an academy, which is
9 a state funded school free from local authority control.
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19 One of the opportunities afforded by using this school as the research site was
20 the different provision given to two groups of pupils. During year 10, a small group of
21 particularly disaffected and disruptive students followed a curriculum distinct from that
22 of the mainstream and were taught in a totally discrete area of the school. Despite this,
23 they did share the same school day including break and lunch times. This became
24 known as the vocational group and the remaining population were known as the
25 mainstream. The mainstream group followed a largely conventional curriculum and
26 were taught in an orthodox style. As the participants moved into year 11, the vocational
27 group was expanded to include more students from the mainstream. This offered an
28 opportunity to compare the extent to which the participants felt that their voice was
29 heard in these two contexts. A purposive sampling strategy (Savin-Baden and Major
30 2013) generated a sample of 20 participants with 8 in the vocational group and 12 in the
31 mainstream group. This imbalance did not represent the split between the two groups as
32 the mainstream group was significantly bigger than the vocational group. The sample
33 was structured in this way in order to examine the contrast between the staff/student
34 relationships in the two groups and also to investigate non-compliant behaviour which
35 was more prevalent in the vocational group rather than to faithfully represent the school
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3 as a whole. The field work began in February when the participants were in year 10 and
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5 continued until the February when they were in year 11.
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8 A thematic analysis of the data was carried out using coding; assigning
9
10 descriptive labels to fragments of the data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Strauss (1987)
11
12 identifies a difference between codes derived from the literature and codes that arise in-
13
14 vivo. The systematic use of in-vivo codes provides a 'bottom up' approach to the
15
16 coding. In-vivo coding was used to group the data based on their contents rather than
17
18 because they contrived to fit a predetermined scheme. This gave rise to the two
19
20 thematically coherent findings sections presented here.
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23
24 This project conformed to the ethical guidelines set out by the British
25
26 Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011). No one was coerced into taking part
27
28 in this research and everyone was made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage.
29
30 This is a particularly important consideration when working with vulnerable groups
31
32 such as children who are used to being given instructions by adults. Each participant
33
34 signed a consent form demonstrating they understood what they were agreeing to take
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36 part in and the Ethics Committee at the researcher's institution agreed to the research
37
38 being carried out.
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43 **Findings**

44 *Unconventional Relationships*

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47 The contrast between the experiences of the vocational and mainstream groups was
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49 particularly clear in terms of the different experiences of teacher-student relationships.
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51 The relationships between students and teachers in the vocational group in Year 10 were
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53 significantly different to those witnessed elsewhere and there were a number of reasons
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55 for this. There was much more of a sense of being on the same level and working
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3 together to achieve a common end than there was in a conventional classroom. The
4
5 groups were smaller and they tended to learn by working on projects together, rather
6
7 than through traditional didactic lessons. This gave rise to an affiliation that was based
8
9 far more on mutual trust than on a power imbalance and, in turn, this difference meant
10
11 that staff were not seen as 'teachers'. It was common for the staff to be referred to by
12
13 their first names, even those in more senior positions, and one TA was even referred to
14
15 as 'Nan' because she was with them all the time. However, there was a distinction
16
17 drawn between those staff that had a great deal of day to day contact with them and
18
19 those that were more managerial. The managerial staff were considered as a part of the
20
21 wider school system by the vocational students and as such they were not trusted in the
22
23 same way. Much of this is evidenced in the quotation below.
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29 Me: So do you prefer it in vocational to mainstream?

30 Several: Yeah

31 Jenna: Yeah, because, like, when you talk to, like, the adults in there, they're not
32
33 like teachers. You can talk to them like a person.

34 Me: You think they're not like teachers?

35 Jenna: No. They're not like teachers.

36 Me: Are they teachers? How do you see them?

37 Jenna: One of 'ems a teacher, but they're not actually all teachers.

38 Chloe: Tanya 'n that go to university dunt they.

39 Elizabeth: Yeah, Tina, Josie, Becky.

40 Ella: Mike's at college or university. He's at one of the two.

41 Chloe: Yeah, but Mike's classed as a teacher.

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49 Mike was a former site manager who had become the principal teacher for the
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51 vocational group since the conversion to academy status. The difference between Mike,
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53 who was their main point of contact at school in Year 10, and the more senior teachers
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55 is also exemplified below. The students were keen to discuss Mike since he represented
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57 so much of what they liked about their school experience.
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3 Martin: We like Mike. Mike's probably the best teacher.

4 Me: Why's that?

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6 Martin: Coz 'e don't shout much.

7
8 Charlie: Mike, if you ask him to leave you alone for a few minutes and come back
9 he'll do it.

10
11 Me: Ok. And why do you think that is?

12
13 Brandon: Coz 'es chilled out. Not like them. Think they're all hard.
14

15
16 Part of the reasoning for the depth of their relationships with their teachers in the
17 vocational stream was the belief that they acted as a line of defence against the wider
18 school and its processes. Mike, for example, was seen as defending them against actions
19 by the SLT in after school staff meetings.
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26 Brandon: So you think Mike doesn't do much for us, yeah, but when he's in the
27 after school meetings, yeah, with Ern an' that, yeah, he does stick up for us a lot.
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31 Having drawn this distinction between the more senior teachers and the staff that the
32 vocational students had most day to day contact with, it is important to note that the
33 students highlighted another division between the senior staff working with them and
34 those in the broader school. This tranche of school staff was seen as being 'on their
35 side' to a greater extent than other 'outsiders'.
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43 As consequence of this atypical rapport with their teachers, where there was a
44 greater degree of trust, the vocational students believed that they caused much less
45 trouble than they would in a different context. However, they were still keen to
46 emphasise that they were prepared to be difficult for staff that they saw as being in a
47 position of power, particularly where they had little day to day contact, as with the head
48 teacher for example. This is illustrated here:
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57 Jenna: We're better and we don't cause the adults in there shit because you actually
58 know they've got a personality and they treat you like an adult.

59
60 Me: And how does that compare to kids in mainstream?

1
2
3 Elizabeth: Like, I dunno, if they want something, they kick off right, but with us,
4 we can...

5
6 Chloe: Unless we don't get what we want. With [headteacher] we kick off.

7
8 Elizabeth: We kick off, but not as bad as mainstream do. We don't run round the
9 school.

10
11
12 This is reminiscent of the findings by Narin and Higgins (2011) and Meo and Parker
13 (2004) relating to the improvement of relationships with students placed in alternative
14 education settings. The teachers almost becoming more like friends to the students and
15 resetting their relationships with school staff. However, as these students moved into
16 Year 11, less time was spent with Mike since many of their core subjects were delivered
17 in more traditional classrooms. This was keenly felt by the vocational participants and
18 something they reported on in interviews. Mike was identified as the individual who
19 looked after them the most at school and when they had to spend time away from their
20 tight knit group they were not happy about it, suggesting that part of the closeness of the
21 relationship they had with him was down to a shared group identity.
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36 Charlie: He's our number one teacher. In vocational only he used to teach us for
37 every lesson and we used to love it! And now it's... we've got at most a few hours...

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40
41 The different form of association between staff and pupils in the vocational group
42 across both years was apparent to mainstream students as well. They often stated that
43 they would prefer that kind of approach taken to them and they similarly did not see
44 those staff as 'teachers'. One possible explanation offered for this was that the staff
45 were more relaxed and provided more choices for students. It was also thought that
46 those members of staff were there to support as well as teach, which was in contrast to
47 their experience with their own teachers.
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58 Deena: They're more like lenient... not lenient...

59 Adam: In [vocational]? They're relaxed...

1
2
3 Deena: More relaxed and give you more opportunities. And choices.

4 Me: Are they like... like teachers? Do they behave the same?

5
6 Deena: No.

7 Me: What's different about them?

8
9 Deena: Obviously they behave the same but they're more I dunno how to explain
10 it... How would you explain Becky an' that?

11 Leah: They're like just there for support... They're not really a teacher or anything.

12
13 Deena: Yeah, they support you, they teach you an' that but they support you.
14
15
16

17 The teachers who took the vocational group formed relationships with their students
18 that were more akin to those relationships the students in Lumby's (2012) study had
19 with their mentors. These relationships were significant to those acutely vulnerable
20 students that made up the original vocational group but were also viewed as ideal
21 teacher-student relations by those who experienced more conventional relationships
22 with their teachers.
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30
31 Many of the members of the staff who were liked by students across the school
32 were people who originated from the same area as them and this coincided to a large
33 extent, but not entirely, with those staff who worked with the vocational students. The
34 headteacher joined the school as it became an academy and had moved from a school
35 that was located in a city about an hour's drive away. She had brought a number of
36 teachers with her who commuted, compounding the students' view that the teachers
37 were a different breed to them. The following quote shows the overlap regarding this
38 view between members of the vocational group and the mainstream group.
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50 Charlie: They are from [xxx]. Mike, lives round here coz he's been to this school.

51 Elizabeth: Most of the teachers that are in [vocational], like Tina, she grew up on
52 this estate she knows how it is, she knows how to work the children. That's why
53 most of them like her. They like Mike and Tina coz they grew up here so I think
54 that's a big thing coz when we get all the snobby ones coming from [xxx] or
55 whatever and they went to a different school and they turn round and are like ner
56 ner ner...
57
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60

1
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3 Charlie: like, err at our school we didn't behave like that...

4 Elizabeth: Yeah...

5
6 Charlie: Why don't you go FUCKING BACK THERE THEN!!!
7
8

9 This indicates that the different nature of the relationships experienced by the vocational
10 and mainstream groups had a positive effect on the engagement of the vocational
11 students. This different relationship was also very attractive to the students outside this
12 group. Not only did they say they would value the lack of 'hassle' that the vocational
13 students experienced, but the fact that staff were from the same background as the
14 pupils in the school was significant, meaning that they had a greater understanding of
15 the day to day lives of the participants.
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25 Prior to the expansion of the vocational group in Year 11, there was a shared
26 belief that the forthcoming changes would have a negative impact on them. Their
27 primary concern was that their fairly small group would be absorbed into a much bigger
28 group and that they would lose the distinctive nature of their education. The consistently
29 stated view was that 'It's not going to be like normal vocational'. Specifically, they
30 were apprehensive about the fact that they would be getting new teachers in and that
31 this would disrupt the relationships they had built up with the vocational staff and that this
32 would subsequently lead to behavioural issues. As well as this, it was thought that the
33 increase in the number of students would mean that they were harder to keep track of:
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47 Charlie: You see me and Martin. They won't be able to keep track of all of us.

48 Because we'll still be in the [vocational] area, but with 200 kids. They ain't gonna
49 realise if two of us go missing. Or, like, three of us coz they've still got 200 other
50 kids mucking about.
51
52
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54

55 The vocational group had become very comfortable in their small cluster and clearly felt
56 that its size offered them some protection from the outside world of the school. An
57 increase in the size of this group would mean a change in the teaching personnel and
58
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1
2
3 this would mean that they would lose the teachers they had developed such positive
4 relationships with. Their expected reaction to this was one of increased disruption and
5 rejection of their schooling.
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9
10 From the beginning of Year 11, they felt that their concerns over the changes
11 were justified and that their comfortable and safe world had been taken away from
12 them.
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16
17
18 Brandon: We've been thrown back into mainstream haven't we really.

19 All: Yeah.

20
21 Brandon: We've had our own little group didn't we. And then they've just quit that
22 group, finished that group and put us back in mainstream.
23
24

25
26 As a result of this exposure they claimed that their behaviour had deteriorated and this
27 certainly appeared to be borne out during observations. They had formed very strong
28 bonds with a very specific and small group of teachers and they felt comfortable with
29 this group. Breaking apart this sense of family had a huge impact on the students and
30 their sense of identity and safety. They even made comments during interviews about
31 the classrooms being bigger even though this was clearly not the case. The reality did
32 not matter, it was their sense that everything had been distorted that led to these views.
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42 Where they had been reasonably engaged with the work they were doing in Year 10
43 they were now far more disruptive.
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46
47 The vocational participants had experienced a positive change as they went into
48 Year 10 and had formed effective working relationships with their teachers but as they
49 went into Year 11 they were now exposed. Where they had been sheltered and allowed
50 to form their own little community this was now open to view by the rest of the school
51 and they felt threatened by this, as they had expected to be at the end of Year 10. Their
52 non-compliance became much more overt and intentional as a result of this and they
53
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60 began to detach themselves from their education. As a result, the majority of them were

1
2
3 ultimately excluded. This highlights how vulnerable these students are and how
4
5 important the context of their education is; they had such a negative impression of
6
7 school previously and they had successfully been reengaged. The school had allowed
8
9 them to become comfortable and happy in their small family group and the result of its
10
11 removal was ultimately their total withdrawal from school.
12
13

14
15 This is congruent with the findings of Narin and Higgins (2011) and Meo and
16
17 Parker (2004) in that a reformulation of teacher-student relationships is key to the
18
19 reengagement of pupils from challenging backgrounds. Also, as McGrath and Bergen
20
21 (2015) discovered, the forming of these positive relationships in the light of prior
22
23 negative experience is particularly powerful. However, the alteration of the situation
24
25 that they were so comfortable with caused a significant emotional injury to these
26
27 already vulnerable students. What had begun as a very successful experiment with these
28
29 students had, through its expansion, exacerbated the kind of outcomes that might have
30
31 been expected in the first instance.
32
33

34 35 36 *Non-Compliance as a Substitute for Voice*

37
38 Having scrutinised the nature of the participants' relationships with adults, I shall now
39
40 go on to look at how this related to their sense of a lack of formal voice within school.
41
42 The key quotation below shows that their frequent refusal to comply with the
43
44 expectations of school authorities was intimately linked with a lack of mutual
45
46 recognition in the sense discussed earlier. Their view was that their non-compliance was
47
48 more powerful than their teachers' systemic power.
49
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52
53
54 We are in charge, they might have the name by their head, like Principal and all
55
56 that shit, but we're in charge of the school. The school is mainly for running
57
58 education and everything if we can't be fucked to do our education, they're not ...
59
60 We're in charge of the school coz they're not doing their jobs properly. Of

1
2
3 educating us. If we can't be fucked and say nah mate, I'm not doing any work, all
4 that shit, like we normally do... We're in charge coz we're saying no. They might
5 say, come on, come on, come on but in the end we're in charge of what we do.
6
7
8

9
10 Charlie

11
12 In discussions, participants always had very clear ideas about the direction they would
13 like their school life to take, particularly across three key areas; learning, the uniform
14 and the nature of the school building. They were very vocal about their preference for
15 practical learning, independent and personalised learning as well as the restrictions that
16 were placed on their subject choices. As far as the uniform went their distaste for
17 blazers was clear and they desperately wanted a return to wearing the type of jumpers
18 that they had worn previously. They also had many thoughts and opinions about the
19 approach that should be taken towards the new building and its layout, some of these
20 more realistic than others. It is important to make this point to demonstrate that the
21 students were not just mindlessly rebelling with no clear idea of what they would prefer.
22 It may not have been consistently realistic or attainable but they did have a clear sense
23 of a different direction for key aspects of their education. However, due to the lack of
24 recognition between them and their teachers their voice was not heard.
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43 There was a pervasive sense that they had extremely little influence over the
44 decision-making processes in the school. The participants clearly gave the impression
45 that if their thoughts were heard and responded to they would be prepared to accept a
46 different outcome. One particularly good example of their views being ignored was with
47 respect to the uniform, their frustrations being clear in this exchange:
48
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55 Esther: With the uniforms we all had our say on what uniform we wanted and she
56 said something completely different.

57
58 Jenni: Yeah, none of us even said any of this.

59
60 Esther: No, none of us said nothin' like this.

1
2
3 Deena: Yeah, but the whole school chose what they wanted but I wasn't there at
4 that time that they said it as well, now we've heard it before and [headteacher]
5 don't change nothin'. She just thinks her own mind.
6

7
8 Esther: She just did this...

9
10 Jenni: Yeah, but if she... if... if... if we weren't here then she wouldn't have a
11 school. So she should take up our opinions.

12
13 Deena: Yeah, coz she's not the one that's learning here... she's just runnin' it... she
14 doesn't have to sit in the class room 6 hours a day...
15

16
17 The participants' justification for having their voice heard is also apparent here. Their
18 perspective was that the staff and the head might be responsible for managing the
19 school but they were the ones for whom it was being run and as such they should have
20 more of a say in its decision making processes.
21
22

23
24 As in many schools, there was a student council in place known as 'student
25 voice'. Students were elected on to this through tutor groups and there were year
26 councils that in turn elected representatives on the school council. However, the
27 participants could see no benefit from participating. There was a recognition that
28 whatever the senior leadership wanted to happen would happen and there was little
29 point in trying to do anything about it. The perception of student voice was that it was
30 the school paying lip service to gathering their opinions whilst nothing would change in
31 reality. This coincides with Fielding's (2004) suggestion that much student voice work
32 is predestined to fail since it simply strengthens and emphasises the suppression of
33 pupils. The following exchange highlights this well, making it clear that the students are
34 aware that school staff will simply get what they want.
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52 James: Student voice. 'N' all that. You go to tell 'em what to do 'n' they don't
53 listen.
54

55
56 Mark: An' they don't even do it.

57
58 Simon: I've been put up for that, so if I get voted for I've gotta wear a red shirt! But
59 I don't wanna wear it.
60

1
2
3 James: They're not gonna listen. If [headteacher] don't want something, she don't
4 have it.

5
6 Mark: She's like, 'Oo yeah, we're all listening to you, what you want, you say what
7 you want.' And she won't 'ave it.

8
9 James: She'll only have what she wants.... nah it's too much or something like that.
10 So it's a load of bollocks.
11
12
13

14 In fact, one participant had been a member of the student council at one point in the
15 past, having been encouraged by the notion that he might be able to change the school.
16 However, it quickly became clear to him, he said, that nothing was really going to
17 happen.
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24 Adam: Yeah, I did, but then when I actually joined nobody would actually listen to
25 what you were saying. Coz they were like, join, join, join you can change the
26 school, I had a few ideas, join and then 'nah, we can't do that'. So I just started
27 going for the food.
28
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31

32 Participation in student voice was also offered as a remedy for behaviour on occasion.
33 The response demonstrated in the following exchange was also indicative of how
34 dismissive the participants were of the idea.
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36
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38
39

40 Jenni: You're going to laugh.... Apparently, I'm uncontrollable.

41 [Laughter]

42 Me: Who said that?

43 Jenni: All the teachers.... Tina wants to give me a home visit. She wants to take me
44 out for a meeting for like 2 hours and they want to give me like more responsibility
45 in the school, like...
46
47
48

49 Elizabeth: Student voice. (Laughing)

50 Jenni: I said that I'm NOT doing that... have a laugh...
51
52
53

54 As Robinson and Taylor (2012) describe, student voice is easily co-opted into
55 representing dominant agendas. There was a prevalent idea that people who took part
56 were not like the rest of the student community, adding to the detachment not only
57
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60

1
2
3 between them and any decision-making processes but between them and anyone
4
5 involved in that process.
6
7

8 Deena: I don't speak to student voice, they're a bunch of goons.

9 Jenni: Yeah, they are actually a bunch of goons.
10
11
12

13 This builds on previous work on student voice that suggests that the creation of
14 democratic structures is not a sufficient condition for student voice to be heard. Not
15 only does an effective student voice depend on the quality of relationships with
16 teachers, it depends on students being provided with an understanding of the manner in
17 which a representative democracy should work. Building on this detachment, the
18 students came to see their behaviour in school as a route to power. Recognising that
19 they held some power, even if the distribution of it was one sided, their misbehaviour
20 was a means by which to exercise that power and gain control over their lives at school,
21 offering a sense of control that was missing through legitimate means. This took two
22 forms. Firstly, a rejection of the education, or at least parts of the education, that was on
23 offer to them. This is effectively expressed as a refusal of a right to something that they
24 wanted but was simply not offered in an appropriate form here:
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42 Charlie: The law says we've got a right to an education, but it's our right to say
43 whether we're going to do it or not. So if we're sitting down and piss arse about
44 then it's our right to be saying we don't want to
45
46
47

48 Secondly, they viewed their misbehaviour as a means by which to retaliate as a result of
49 their treatment in school as evidenced here:
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51
52

53 Me: When you misbehave is it wrong?

54 Jenni: No! It's payback! I think it's payback.

55 Mark: It's fair enough...

56 Jenni: Yeah, it's fair enough coz they shout at us all the time! So it's payback.

57 Me: So you think it's what you should be doing?
58
59
60

1
2
3 Jenni: No.... It's obviously not right, but they're ... like... our mums and that think
4 teachers are something that they're not. If they were sat in school... If we had a
5 camera attached to us for the day and we showed it, I think they'd be so shocked.
6
7 Coz when like at teacher meetings, they're just hypocrites.
8
9

10
11 This exercising of their power meant that they were gaining control over the way the
12 school operated and allowed them, to some extent, to shape it in the way they wished it
13 to be. Their non-compliance had become a substitute for the voice that they wanted to
14 have within the school and through this could force themselves to be heard.
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21 **Discussion**

22 *Recognition as Central to Fruitful Relationships*

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24
25 As this study has sought to illustrate, mutual recognition is key to the development of
26 voice and student-teacher relationships are fundamental to the manner in which students
27 engage with school. The nature of the separate vocational and mainstream groups and
28 the subsequent expansion of the vocational group in this study offered a good
29 opportunity to compare different styles of teacher-student relationship. The key to the
30 creation of relationships that engage students is mutual recognition. This has two levels.
31
32 Firstly, teachers that students are with on a day to day basis are a vital point of contact
33 and the degree of recognition between these groups has an immediate effect on
34 engagement. A second issue is the degree of recognition between students and the wider
35 school community. The lack of such recognition was one of the reasons for the longer-
36 term failure of the vocational students to remain engaged with the school.
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53 The changes in the educational setting that the vocational group was exposed to
54 reveal that recognition is a key attribute in creating productive relationships between
55 school staff and students. The improvements in relationships that occurred between staff
56 and students in the Year 10 vocational group suggest that there is an escalation in the
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1
2
3 recognition between students and staff in this context (Honneth 2007, 2012). This is a
4 two-way occurrence with both parties becoming recognised as individuals with unique
5 narratives. However, they were still stigmatised by the bulk of the school staff, even
6 though the staff they encountered day to day were perceived as being on their side. This
7 reveals two aspects of recognition within school; the mutual recognition by the staff
8 encountered on an everyday basis and the lack of recognition from the wider school
9 community. The members of the vocational group were able to engage as peers with
10 their immediate teaching staff, whilst being socially subordinated through being
11 prevented from engaging in social life as a peer elsewhere. The anxiety at the end of
12 Year 10 around the insertion of others into the vocational group signified a betrayal of
13 this recognition between the students and their teachers. This meant that the poor
14 outcomes that might have initially been expected for this group became exacerbated and
15 in due course led to their almost total isolation from the school community.

16
17 This can be contrasted with the nature of relationships outside of the vocational
18 group and the difficulty in establishing genuine recognition between groups with
19 relatively few shared values without any mechanism to enable such recognition. The
20 desire for recognition is the driving force behind group formation (Honneth 2012) and
21 in order to maintain self-respect and self-esteem the students grouped in opposition to
22 their teachers, in contrast with what occurred in the vocational group.

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 ***The Façade of Formal Voice Processes***

49
50 The failure of formal student voice processes acted to further disengage the participants
51 from school, facilitating the belief that school was not run in their interests. Effective
52 voice depends on relationships based on mutual recognition and cannot be based on
53 simple representation. The students in the study understood that teachers had something
54 to offer them, but for this to be effective it required them to be heard on all levels. In the
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1
2
3 absence of their voices being listened to, students resist aspects of the education process
4
5 in order to gain resources to enable themselves to narrate their lives and be heard.
6

7
8 The existence of the student council in the school paid lip service to the notion
9
10 of voice but in reality whatever the leadership of the school wished to happen happened.
11
12 This process, co-opting the opinions of the student body into the dominant agenda,
13
14 ultimately emphasised the suppression of the pupils. The lack of status that the
15
16 participants had within school meant that it was impossible for them to give a true
17
18 account of themselves within school. As a result of this, student voice was denied,
19
20 obstructing alternative, student driven, narratives. The participants recognised that the
21
22 staff were responsible for managing the school but also felt that they were the ones in
23
24 whose interests it should be run and therefore they should have a say in its decision-
25
26 making processes. The staff of the school were identified as a superior rationality that
27
28 had ultimate validity (Couldry 2010) and the school was organised on this premise,
29
30 undermining the voice of the students in the school.
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35
36 The formation of democratic structures is not a sufficient condition for the voice
37
38 of students to be heard. The quality of relationships is the foundation of effective voice.
39
40 As described in the section on recognition, people become subjects through recognising
41
42 and being recognised, i.e. through the dialogic nature of voice. The change in
43
44 affiliations between pupils and teachers in the vocation group in year 10 clearly shows
45
46 this. Honneth (2007) identifies that democracy is a social rather than a solely political
47
48 ideal, it cannot be simply reduced to a representative process. Genuine democracy is the
49
50 experience that the entirety of a given society could succeed through communally
51
52 recognising one another. Recognition is the key element to the production of the good
53
54 relationships that are the prerequisite of effective student voice, specifically Honneth's
55
56 (2012) third level of recognition whereby an individual's abilities are recognised as
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1
2
3 being of inherent worth to their community. This is key to the findings of Percy-Smith
4
5 (2006) and also explains much of what can be seen in the current study.
6
7

8 The participants grasped that their school life cannot be just as they imagined it,
9
10 demonstrating an informal understanding that voice is inconceivable as anything other
11
12 than an open-ended exchange of narratives with others. Although obviously not
13
14 expressed in these terms, they are not naïve about their agency, but rather understand
15
16 that voice is a reflexive agency involving the need to understand what others say and
17
18 also who is saying it (Cavarero 2005). In other words, they understand that the
19
20 experience and knowledge of their teachers is important and useful to them and they
21
22 wish to benefit from it. However, this knowledge and experience needs to be made
23
24 relevant to them through the lens of their own knowledge and experience.
25
26
27

28 Ultimately, non-compliance becomes a means by which to exercise voice. This
29
30 resistance contests power, reaching beyond the reactive and private, becoming political
31
32 (Bright 2011). By rejecting aspects of education that the participants felt were
33
34 inappropriate for them they demonstrate their desire to form a sense of self through
35
36 narrating their own lives (Cavarero 2000). Resistance comes about through the desire to
37
38 gain the material resources required to narrate lives and to do so beyond the restrictions
39
40 of school. This represents a desire for true recognition as individuals capable of
41
42 decision-making.
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48 **Conclusion**

49
50
51 The relationships with teachers that the participants experienced were central to their
52
53 education. The recognition that they desired through these relationships precedes any
54
55 effective student voice procedures. Although there were effective relationships in the
56
57 vocational group these were undermined and delegitimised by the school authorities.
58
59 Relations between teachers and their students need to be rethought, moving beyond
60

1
2
3 behaviour management into something more reciprocal. If the democratic public sphere
4
5 is the medium through which a society manages and resolves its problems (Honneth
6
7 2007) then children's voices are effectively excluded from this. In which case, whose
8
9 problems are being addressed? One could very easily argue that it is the teachers'
10
11 problems and the issues caused for them by mandates from central government such as
12
13 league tables. This raises a broader point as to whether all pupils are at the heart of
14
15 teachers' practice or whether there is a focus on those who will comply with the
16
17 expectations of society, relegating others to the status of a problem to be solved.
18
19

20
21 It is clear from this that good relationships with teachers are a vital prerequisite
22
23 to having voice as a student. Whilst democratic structures are important, they are not the
24
25 'be all and end all' of this process and there is a danger that the absence of voice at a
26
27 more basic level may reinforce a lack of agency in school. Young people know they
28
29 cannot have everything they want and would accept compromise were their voices
30
31 heard and school staff showed a willingness to cooperate with them. However,
32
33 ultimately the desire for this agency manifests itself as non-compliance and a refusal to
34
35 accept things as they are.
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