

**Students' and teachers' interpretations of schooling:
Contested understandings of shared realities**

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Abstract

This paper reports on an on-going study that contrasts the 'voices' and work-related identities of some students who are said to be disaffected with those of other (said to be engaged) students and teachers in a secondary school in England, UK. The research project investigated how student identities are (re) constructed in school, promoting or inhibiting learning, engagement and inclusion. It used visual ethnography and reflexive interviews to collect the data.

Introduction

Recent central government Education policy in England, UK, for the secondary school sector has placed great emphasis on student 'voice' and inclusive education (DfES, 2004) as a means of facilitating student learning. The DfEE (2001), for example, suggests that pupils should be involved in decisions about their own individual learning and about practices in lessons and a school as a whole. Schools are required to provide evidence of student consultation to School Inspectors on their Self Evaluation Forms.

However student 'voice' is often focused on school improvement, rather than on children's rights of citizenship (Thompson and Gunter, 2005). Senior school policy makers seem to perceive 'pupil voice' as a means of achieving school improvement and higher standards of attainment (Thompson and Gunter, 2005). However, such 'consultation' is often tokenistic (Byrom et al, 2007), taking the form of formal student councils, the remit of which is circumscribed by senior staff. In practice students' views about what might constitute for them successful teaching and learning are often completely disregarded by teachers (Hancock and Mansfield, 2002). Teachers who try to include students' voices in school policy-making are constrained by government policies on standards and high attainment (Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002). Even when students' voices are heard, greater respect is accorded to some rather than others (McGregor, 2007). The heterogeneity of student voices rarely seems to be acknowledged. It is this heterogeneity that the research in hand aims to investigate, within a wider context of the rights of the child.

Site of the study

The study was carried out in one mixed-sex 11-16 secondary school in a city in England, UK, serving a multi-ethnic student body from a predominantly disadvantaged socio-economic catchment area. It focused on 13-14 year old students in the context of their school.

Purpose of the study

This study investigated students' and teachers' school-related identities and 'voices' and how they perceived schooling, in relation to the dominant discourses of a school. It acknowledged the heterogeneity of student voice by investigating the different perspectives of engaged and disaffected students and their teachers. Specifically it aimed to:

- pilot a research design which will elicit a range of contrasting student voices (with those of other actors in schools) within their social, cultural and learning contexts
- explore how disaffected and engaged students and teachers construct their identities and learning communities in relation to the dominant discourses of schools
- investigate the links between student voice, identities and the development of the official and unofficial discourses of inclusion, engagement and discipline
- construct a process of self-review through which teachers, students and parents can engage with their diverse perspectives and strengthen policies and practices for inclusion and engaged learning

Conceptual framework

The study draws on conceptual frameworks of post-structuralism (Foucault 1976, in Gordon 1980), identity (Giddens, 1991) and student voice (Fielding, 2004; and Byrom et al, 2007) to make sense of the different school-related identities students (re)construct and the voices they develop about schooling and the school in contrast to those of their teachers and the official discourses of the school.

This study takes a post-modern and post-structural stance towards interpersonal relationships and power in school organisations, rather than a modernist one. Taking what they call a post-modern approach to action research in schools, Brown & Jones (2001) summarise some of the dilemmas facing researchers pursuing a modernist agenda of school improvement. They point out that, 'research predicated on possible improvements in practice will probably continue to be disappointed with its general impact', (Brown, 2001, p. 169). As, 'teachers exercise their agency caught within the typically modern, complex paradox of knowing subject and manipulated object' (Brown and Jones, 2001, p. 166), so educational researchers run the same risk when they aim to access the voices of young people as a means of illuminating the ways in which 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1972) operate in schools. By throwing light on this area, we (as academics) are forced to recognise not only the ways in which we critically engage with these regimes, but also the ways in which we are constituted within them.

Within social science, truth is always relative to the time and place in which it is located, and claims to objective truth are at best flawed and at worst coercive and harmful. Foucault (1972) claimed that the dominance of certain discourses occurred not only because they were located in socially powerful institutions – those given coercive powers by the state – but also because their discourses claimed absolute truth. Thus research focussing on the voice of the child within a school as a social institution should investigate the nature of truth claims, and the ways in which power works at a micro and macro level within the school, in order to understand the meanings that participants are making of their experiences. This is a very different focus from asking young people to say what they think about their schooling in order to improve their educational experiences. For Barrett (1991) Foucault's most satisfying works are his empirical accounts of particular texts and institutions, and those which focussed on everyday mundane routines, taken-for-granted architecture and banalities. It is these that we hope to illuminate through visual methods in this study.

Methodology

The methodology used is derived from the critical stance taken by the researchers, and the critical conceptual framework used by them to construct the study. It is made up of:

- A critical analysis of discourses of participation and engagement, and the ways in which this contributes to feelings of power / powerlessness amongst young people and adults

- Analysis of discourses of discipline, punishment and surveillance in schools (Foucault, 1977; 1986)
- Contrasting critical discourse analysis with researcher's perspectives and reflections on other participants' data
- Developing visual methods for investigating participants' views / voices about schooling (Prosser, 2001; Rose, 2006)

To carry out this research, the researchers used a case study approach that was bounded in time (2007- 2009) and space (one school, one year group of students and their teachers in the school), as is explained below. The students and their teachers were selected purposively.

The case study focused on engaged and disaffected students (as defined by their class teachers) and was carried out in a secondary school which served a multi-ethnic student body from a predominantly disadvantaged socio-economic catchment area in a city in the Midlands of England, UK. As well as collecting and analysing school policy documents and carrying out interviews with the schools senior managers to interrogate the official discourses of the school, particularly around policies and practices of social inclusion, we intended to select and work with some Year Nine (Y9) 13/14 year old students and their subject teachers in English and Citizenship to investigate their perspectives on themselves in the school setting. The subject areas were chosen to facilitate access to the school, as the project fitted with the National Curriculum for Y9 students (oracy, literacy, developing critical voice) and the National curriculum for Citizenship (construction of self and identity within social systems)

Three groups of 12 students from Y9 (36 students in all) were to be selected, of whom 18 were to be defined by their teachers as 'engaged' and 18 as 'disengaged'. To construct the groups of students, their class teachers were to be asked to select those whom they thought were strongly engaged or disengaged, using indicators such as: attendance, punctuality, homework, participation in curricular and extra-curricular events, alignment with goals and aims of the school, and performance in line with expectation. To locate the students in one of their normal learning communities, 12 were to be selected from a top set in English, 12 from a bottom set and 12 from a mixed-ability tutor group (defined as a Citizenship teaching group).

The selected students were to be trained to be participant visual ethnographers, capturing views of themselves in school photographically, and then constructing a story board /scrapbook with the photographs.

Photographs can be used powerfully to indicate people's relationships to each other and to social institutions such as schools (Prosser, 2001). The latter can be captured by people recording their relationships with social and cultural artefacts, such as notices, as well as with people and the material and spatial fabric of an institution, such as a school. They demonstrate relationships that may be subtle or easily overlooked. They can communicate the feeling or suggest the emotion imparted by activities, environments, and interactions to people, and they can, 'provide a degree of tangible detail, a sense of being there and a way of knowing that may not readily translate into other symbolic modes of communication.' (Prosser, 2001, 116)

Within education, several projects have been set up in which young people have been asked to take photographs or to make drawings to represent their views of life in school (Riley and Rustique-Forester, 2002, Cremin & Slatter, 2004, Gunther and Thomson 2005, Weller, 2007, Leitch & Mitchell, 2007). Such photographs have often formed the basis of interviews to explore the meanings that the young people themselves attach to the pictures. In this study the scrapbooks were intended to form the basis of students' reflexive interviews with the research team. Teachers were asked to carry out

a similar process. Students' and teachers' views were contrasted triangulated with the official discourse of the school as conveyed through the voices of some senior school managers and from school policy documents, and with the views of some parents.

The qualitative data was to be analysed through standard processes of thematic analysis and of critical discourse analysis. The pictorial data was to be analysed quantitatively, using content analysis, as well as qualitatively through thematic and discourse analysis for meaning and the interpretations offered by participants. There are various modes of analysis that can be used for pictures, compositional interpretation, content analysis, semiology, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, and audience studies – each have their own analytical assumptions and their own empirical focus (Rose, 2001). Prosser (2001) suggests that any discussion using photographs in the research process should begin by considering researchers' underlying epistemological and methodological assumptions, since they orientate the way in which studies are conducted. It is for this reason that a good deal of care was given to thinking about the research before it was begun.

Negotiating entry to the school : Changing Plans

Negotiating entry into the school led to some modifications in our research design. Teachers in the English and Citizenship departments were willing to be involved with us, but insisted that we worked with whole classes. They argued that to only work with 12 students in each class would encourage a sense of discrimination in the students left out of the project, and would prevent those students from benefiting from participation in the project. They also pointed out that logistically it would be very difficult to work with a small project group only during lessons. The timetabling of the school curriculum to meet the demands of the National Curriculum was so tight that students could not afford to miss work. Further, Year Nine (Y9) students had to undertake important SATs in the second part of their academic year, so could not afford to miss lessons. In the teachers' views the possible alternative strategy of lunchtime 'lessons' for the project would not work / attract sufficient participants for the project's needs. In addition the Special Needs Coordinator was very keen for the Special Learning Needs (SLN) group for Y9 to be included in the study. Finally the teachers, despite their enthusiasm for the technological focus of the project, pointed out that they would have to book the school's computer suites for several lessons. This they thought would be difficult, not least because of the demands other teachers made on those scarce resources. Finally the teachers argued that though they were willing to make their classes available to the researchers for a certain number of lessons in December and early January and in July, they expected the researchers to lead the lessons.

The first two demands put strains on the project budget that had not been expected. These were particularly severe in the use of time. Expanding the participation of students in each of 3 classes from 12 to the whole class involved adjustments to the production of teaching materials and an increase in the number of cameras to be bought. However the major impact was on the time available to the research assistant. Although the research assistant was able to continue with analysing the documents and carrying out the interviews with senior staff, as planned, she had to spend a considerable amount of time working with the SLN group which had not been anticipated. Consequently the time that had been planned for carrying out a wide ranging literature review did not materialise.

The third demand led the research team to re-think how students might collect their photographic data and create the materials for their group presentations. Since access to sufficient computer resources was difficult, there was no point in students using digital cameras or their cell-phone cameras which would have needed the transfer of data from camera to computer. Ordinary disposable cameras were used instead. These proved to be considerably cheaper and produced

adequate results which students could stick into their scrapbooks. It also led the research team to decide not to try to ask students to create power-point presentations at all but to create group posters reflecting their identities and their views of the school's contexts. These posters the students introduced to their peers during the course of one of their lessons late in the school year.

The fourth demand raised some very uncomfortable questions about what would be the impact of researchers acting temporarily as 'teachers' on the relationships that the researchers would develop with the students. It also challenged the researchers to think very hard about what was the difference between trying to 'teach lessons on ...' and introducing a data gathering process to people with whom they wanted to work as 'colleagues' not as subordinates. It opened the risk that the attitudes and views which students expressed in their photographs and, later, in their posters might be marred by temporarily hierarchical relationships with the researchers, as well as mimicking their ordinary relationships with teachers and other staff in the school. Further, it meant that the researchers were no longer able to work only with small groups of students. Although the teachers remained in the classrooms and helped to supervise the work, they had effectively handed the running of these lessons over to the researchers. This created interesting dilemmas for the researchers who wanted to work in a productive and respectful environment with the students, whilst conforming to school conventions concerning classroom management and control. It was a particular dilemma for one of the researchers was a PGCE tutor, and needed to maintain her professional image as someone who can 'control a class'.

Preliminary Findings 1: The school policy context

The following discussion is based on the thematic analysis of a collection of school documents which outline school policy. Discussions with school senior staff helped to amplify the central meanings of this policy which creates the contexts of students' lives and identities. The teachers, too, were faced with the same policy frameworks and sometimes seemed to have felt as powerless about them as the students, but they also mediated these frameworks to the students as well as occasionally facilitating students' engagement with these frameworks.

The policy documents studied were:

Attendance policy; Anti-bullying policy; Able and talented policy; Behaviour management policy; Careers education and guidance policy; Citizenship policy; Complaints policy; Child protection and safeguarding policy (CPS); [School] statement of intent; Equal opportunities policy; Inclusion policy; Race equality policy.

In addition a number of National Curriculum and Inspection documents were considered.

When interrogated for the school's view or definition to guide evaluation of the engaged or 'good' student, 'engaged' students were variously constructed as:

Conformist (*e.g., wears uniform, attends regularly, arrives on time, follows rules*);

The good citizen *e.g. has a social conscience, does not stand by and allow others to be bullied; takes opportunities to contribute to school life/decisions where invited, eg via student council*);

The good learner (*e.g., makes good academic progress*).

However, there were few direct references in the documents either to engagement or disaffection, so the 'engaged' and 'disaffected' categorisations are implicit in the various other constructions of students in the policy documents. 'Disaffected' students were variously constructed as:

Vulnerable (*Vulnerable: in need of protection by the school, in need of reform/reintegration by the school/ compensation in some way for (socially/culturally) impoverished home life*);

Non-conformist/threatening (*problem student, aspects of behaviour require punishment, strong action to be taken*).

In some cases students **straddle two or more above categories**, e.g. bullies who are both a threat to others and in need of help and protection themselves, so vulnerable as well (see bullying policy)

Interwoven with the above constructions of students, a thread running throughout several (though not all) of the policy documents was that of social capital and cultural deprivation. For example, implicit and explicit references to the impact of home on school performance/engagement appear in certain documents. Underlying these was an assumption that (arguably, white, middle class) school culture is neutral, and that the values promoted by the school provide the standard to which students (and their families) should aspire. Whilst references to inclusion feature regularly, social and cultural diversity was at times constructed as a problem to be modified rather than as an actuality to be embraced by the school. Contradictory messages therefore emerged: whilst the school sought to facilitate inclusion, a 'deficit model' view of certain pupils' social and cultural backgrounds underpinned some of its policy statements. The culture and values of certain pupils (and their families) were constructed as 'other' to those espoused by the school. As such they constituted a threat to the school aims, and were thought at least likely to impede some pupils' achievements. A tension therefore existed between the school's commitment to inclusion and its commitment to certain values and standards.

In addition to the above, which related to developing young people as responsible (conformist) citizens, there were a number of references to order and control, which seemed to include protection of those perceived as vulnerable, as well as, in some cases, staff:

'students are taught to respect the 'personal space' of other young people and adults' (CPS sec 4)

'we are committed to supporting and safeguarding students...in order to enhance the life chances of vulnerable students (CPS sec 1).

'Cameras are placed in rooms where staff may work with the most vulnerable students who present difficult behaviours so that allegations against staff can be efficiently dismissed if made by students' (CPS sec 15).

'Staff 'on call' must radio that they have returned safely if they have been called to an isolated place on the [School] site to confront a student or intruder' (CPS sec 15).

'The [School] Rule of 'no hooded tops to be worn' exists so that intruders can be picked out on camera' (CPS sec 15).

The school was surrounded by a stout iron railed fence and entry and egress were controlled through a limited number of doors, with other spaces within the school barred off by secure (security) fencing to prevent the un-surveyed movement of people. The nerve centre of the school's communication system – the school reception office – and the Principal's office were only accessible along corridors guarded by security coded doors. Only the staffroom, itself guarded by security coded doors, offered a by-pass to this carceral regime.

Clearly visible in such regulations are processes of surveillance and gaze (Foucault, 1977) which the students noticed and commented on when they were taking their photographs and making their scrapbooks.

Preliminary Findings 2: Content analysis of student scrapbooks

Students in groups

	Boys (23)	Girls (13)	Commentary
Tgrp	7	5	
Bgrp+SLN	9	4	
MAgrp	7	4	
Disaffected	10 ¹	6	
Engaged	10 ¹	7	

¹ plus 3 over both cells not marked by teacher

Comparisons of the structures of the scrapbooks of boys and girls

	Boys (23)	Girls (13)	Commentary
Pages	167	109	
Photos	234	149	
Words	2254	1690	
illustrations	30	45	

Comparisons of the structures of the scrapbooks of 'Engaged' & 'Disaffected' students

	Engaged (17 ²)	Disaffected (16)	Commentary
Pages	138	125	
Photos	160	208	
Words	2152	1615	
illustrations	15	56	

² One student listed as 'engaged' in one class and 'disaffected' in another

Comparison of the information in the scrapbooks of boys and girls

	Boys (23)	Girls (13)	Student comments	Examples

Male peer (yes)	23	16		
Female peers (yes)	9	30		
Male peer (nos. In photo)	32	23		
Female peer (nos. In photo)	12	53		
Teachers	11	14		
Other staff	5	4		
Classrooms	29	4		
Teaching block	35	15		
Year base	0	3		
Sports hall/field	32	13		
Outdoor space	25	13		
Library	6	4		
Dining room /ktichen	17	12		
Medical room	3	3		
Corridor	23	3		
Decorative pictures	7	1		
Noticeboards / signs	33	14		
Litter/ dirt/ disrepair / graffiti	33	19		
Toilets	10	8		
School entrance /exit/ sign	28	6		
Security	4	4		

Comparison of the information in the scrapbooks of 'Engaged' & 'Disaffected' students

	Engaged (17 ²)	Disaffected (16)	Student comments	Examples
Male peer (yes)	6	26		
Female peers (yes)	8	28		
Male peer (nos. In photo)	7	36		
Female peer (nos. In photo)	14	44		
Teachers	14	9		
Other staff	4	4		
Classrooms	8	25		
Teaching block	23	26		
Year base	3	0		
Sports hall/field	17	27		
Outdoor space	17	19		
Library	7	3		
Dining room /ktichen	10	19		
Medical room	3	3		
Corridor	9	13		

Decorative pictures	3	5		
Noticeboards / signs	22	25		
Litter/ dirt/ disrepair / graffiti	22	30		
Toilets	7	11		
School entrance /exit/ sign	20	14		
Security	4	4		

Emergent themes from student interviews

The following themes have emerged from student interview but now need to be tested against and saturated with data from staff interviews, student photographs, and student presentations to explore the discourses that are emerging from these people in school.

Avenues for pupils' voices *positive*

Negative

e.g. Disciplinary teachers (affects relationship)

Silent voices

e.g. 'I used to cry in bed every day – I never told anyone.' (Mstud, p 2)

Why is she never there? (DT teacher, Mstud, p 5 bottom)

Friends

e.g. Security; Bad influence

Views of other pupils

e.g. Bullies
Popular girls (rich, pretty, lads fancy them)
Looks really matter

Relationships with staff *the teachers*

e.g. Moody/unpredictable teachers; Imitate friends to impress; Disciplinary role
Earn respect

Non-teaching staff

Different expectations for teachers and pupils

e.g. 'We're not allowed to shout at them..and they think they're better than you and everything, but they're not.'

Perceptions of [School]

e.g. noisy; Get pushed; Poor behaviour; Improving school; Lots of bullies; Racism pervasive;
Good technology college; Scary as a newcomer

Behaviour

Positive

Negative

e.g. Distracted; Shouting; Play up when bored

Learning experiences

Positive

e.g. Support with studies; Interactive whiteboards; Typing and ICT; Popular staff

Negative

e.g. Boring – sit down and write; Poor relationships with some teachers

[School] Subjects

[School] Buildings

Identity

Non –school Identity

Family

School Identity

e.g. Helps others; Difference (e.g. race)

Changing identity

e.g. Scared to confident; Belief in self; Daring to try new things; Learnt to be different; More friends

Future plans

Futures / Conclusion

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