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**Educational Diversity**  
**The Subject of Difference**  
**and Different Subjects**  
 Edited by Yvette Taylor

## The Subject of Difference and Different Subjects

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professionals will be consulted and offer support at School Action Plus. Effectively, where there has been insufficient attention to pedagogies that prioritise unique learning needs, young people with moderate learning difficulties or internalised emotional and behavioural difficulties are less likely to be considered as an eligible locus of concern. As potential subjects of inclusion policies, young people with moderate learning difficulties are more likely to be viewed in terms of 'general difference' (ibid.), working to separate them from their classmates. Thus, school policies and practices towards particular pupils have been developed around an understanding of the need to 'deal with' or manage young people's problematic difference as an extra task rather than conceptualising their unmet needs as a failing of educational provision. The focus is placed firmly on inherent difficulties of individual learners, signifying a deficit of individual pupils or pupil groups.

The views of pupils designated as having these less obvious 'learning difficulties' or SEN are under-represented in the emerging body of work that does draw on pupil views. Further, there has been little research done to examine the optimal techniques for eliciting the views of young people with communication difficulties and those who perceive themselves as outside the schools' cultural and academic norms. As such, discussion of methodology and research techniques tends to support the individualistic emphasis invariably placed on the study of SEN, tending to neglect the ways in which research replicates a deficit or difference-based model of students' needs. Instead, this study is innovative in its conceptualisation of SEN in terms of unmet need. It aims to explore new methodologies for gaining the views of young people designated as having SEN, yet simultaneously marginalised from this identity as 'difficult' students, by placing the emphasis upon how these students understand relatively abstract concepts of fairness, inclusion, social equality and marginalisation. This chapter will thus explore the need to examine school-based marginalisation and exclusion from the pupils' perspectives, before discussing the development and use of alternative methodologies to explore exclusion with pupils for whom traditional research methods are not meaningful or productive.

#### Why pupil voice?

There is an increasing recognition of the value of pupil voice in educational research, and particularly in relation to understanding the specific barriers to pupils' learning and engagement with school. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) asserts that children and young people have the right to express their opinions on all

matters affecting them. The convention calls upon governments and agencies working with young people to listen to and act upon the views they express on matters that directly affect their lives. As education concerns its pupils, they should therefore be consulted seriously about its conduct and reform (Fielding and Bragg, 2003), and treated with respect in its implementation (Osler, 2000). Further, the introduction of citizenship education into the National Curriculum in 2002 highlighted the potential of pupil voice in contributing to learning processes, and also emphasised the links between young people's experiences of fairness, participation and inclusion in school and their expectations as citizens in society.

However, the views of pupils are still surprisingly scarce in educational research, despite their clear competence as commentators (Wood, 2003). This absence is perhaps particularly marked for pupils in already marginalised groups (Hamill and Boyd, 2002; Rose and Shevlin, 2004). As Reay (2006) among others has pointed out, the use of pupil voice may perpetuate existing hierarchies and peer relations that disadvantage particular groups or individuals. First, the views of the most able, articulate and resourceful students are usually represented in pupil voice research and this is particularly the case when teachers select the pupils who will participate in the research. Further, the concerns and interests of the most successful pupils may be taken uncritically to represent those of the pupil group as a whole and experiences of marginalisation and exclusion can be written out of the pupil experience in this way. Thus, it is important in understanding more about equity to seek out the views of all pupils, including the most disadvantaged and least likely to speak out.

Among pupil groups thought to be disadvantaged by current, conventional schooling arrangements, the views of pupils designated as having 'SEN' are particularly under-represented in educational research. The experiences of pupils who experience learning, physical or emotional impairments, impairment effects or stigma (Hunt, 1966; Rose and Shevlin, 2004) have rarely been compared with those defined as 'successful'. One consequence of this is that the experiences of young people who could be marginalised in school, for a range of social, medical and academic reasons, may be overlooked. Various explanations have been put forward for the relative exclusion of these pupils from pupil voice research. First, this group has been thought not to have strong views on their schooling experiences due to their supposed cognitive and emotional deficiency (e.g. Hamill and Boyd, 2002). Incomplete or insubstantial responses to researcher questions have thus



a direct question, to elicit views. The tendency for adults, particularly teachers, to use question-answer feedback routines has been described by some writers as reflecting power relationships. Our substantive focus on equity necessitates the development of tools and settings that ensure the equal participation of pupils across a wide range of abilities and backgrounds.

Using statements as a prompt, rather than demanding a response through questioning has been argued to reflect a more equal relationship in which the young person can retain some control over the direction of the discussion, as well as a useful technique for triggering responses with young people. Barter and Renold (2002) have argued that vignettes can allow participants to retain control over the research process. While a growing body of interdisciplinary work has used vignettes to explore a range of social issues, including violence among adolescents (Barter and Renold, 2002), young people in care (Moules, 2009) and gender norms (Feinlee and Muraco, 2009), there has been less work conducted to examine the methodological utility of vignettes, particularly in work with young people. A vignette is a short story or scenario that provides 'concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which participants can comment. The researcher can facilitate a discussion around the opinions expressed' (Hazel, 1995, p. 2).

Vignette is a useful method for exploring subjective belief systems and can help to identify group norms, shed light on social processes occurring inside and out of school, and stimulate discussion on potentially sensitive subjects by removing these from the level of the individual pupil (O'Kane, 2008, p. 140). Vignettes could also be argued to provide an avenue for 'consciousness' (Freire, 1970) by exposing oppressive elements in the lives of students and thereby enabling them to express and name their experiences of oppression (including marginalisation and exclusion) in a safe way.

In the present study, vignettes were constructed on the basis of previous research on sensitive topics with young people (e.g. Barter and Renold, 2000; O'Kane, 2008). The vignettes comprised short scenarios of no more than three lines about a young person with an impairment. The example below was used in the present study:

Veronica is deaf and she communicates mostly using sign language. The other pupils in her class sometimes leave Veronica out of games at break time because it is a lot of effort to communicate with her.

The scenarios were based on examples of social and academic exclusion that young people in previous research studies had named (Hamill and

Boyd, 2002). The vignette was read out to the pupils and presented to them on card. This was followed up with probes asking pupils whether this was a familiar situation, what their reactions to the scenario were and whether they thought this was a fair outcome for the pupil featured in the vignette. The vignettes were written in accessible language and were printed onto cards in large font so that these could be picked up and read by the pupils in our study. Pupils talked about one vignette for as long as it held their interest and they had opinions they wanted to share about the specific scenario presented to them.

### Context

The study was conducted in a mainstream school in North Yorkshire in 2008–2009. The school is located in a relatively affluent catchment area and it has an integrated 'resource centre' to provide additional learning support for pupils designated as having SEN. The school has won numerous inclusion awards and it badges itself as a model of good inclusive practice in its mission statement, school behavioural policy and other documentation. The school adopts a capabilities approach (Sen, 1999) to inclusion and wellbeing in terms of encouraging young people to 'be what they can be in school'. The school mission statement thus states that the school 'aims to be a successful learning community that gives learners the confidence and capability to develop as far as their imagination can take them'. The discourse of celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion is prevalent at official as well as informal levels. The school was thus opportunistically and purposively selected as a model of good practice on the basis of resources, accolades and policies committed to inclusion.

### Sampling

Small-group, mixed-gender interviews were conducted with four pupils, aged 14–15 years, who were designated by the school as having SEN. The pupils were selected for participation in the study by the school's SENCO, who stated that they experienced a range of impairments to their learning and that they needed differing levels of support. The pupils were interviewed on four occasions over the school year. Although we had asked to speak with pupils with a range of impairments, all the pupils we met with were fluent communicators and defined themselves as relatively well-integrated and functioning (at least in terms of the school's definition of these terms). We did wonder whether the school had selected these particular pupils in order to demonstrate their competence at 'including' young people. We were not advised of the pupils' impairments ahead of conducting the small-group



contrasts of opinion between the students, highlighting a heterogeneity that is often lost in more individualistic accounts of disabled students' experience.

As such, this diverse range of experience enhanced the growing criticisms made of school culture, policies and academic processes providing us with an 'interpretation of actions and occurrences that allows situational context to be explored and influential variables to be elucidated' (ibid.). Often through comparison with the vignettes, the fictional scenarios led the students to introduce their own interpretations of exclusionary processes and social marginalisation, demonstrating how this differed according to influential variables (such as teacher's attitudes), and tacit, or sometimes explicit, expectations of the 'normal' student in each learning context. Further, these accounts revealed some of the ways in which processes of exclusion and judgements made about academic competency were inherently gendered (see Gillies, this volume). These particular strengths of the vignettes will be examined further in the following sections, evaluating their particular potential for investigating disabled students' experiences.

#### **Sensitivity, disability and the 'normality' of the vignette**

By presenting a range of fictional scenarios for the students to discuss, they were able to talk about distressing and exclusionary events from a detached point of view, leaving the decision about whether to make personal disclosures firmly in their control. The vignettes also offered a number of recognisable stories, which allowed them to form identifications in a less stigmatising fashion. Over time, as the stories of exclusion and impairment-related dilemmas were approached as a more common form of experience, and feelings of stigmatisation were more openly confronted in less individualised ways, this resulted in more direct reference between the vignettes and their own experiences of marginalisation. Consequently, the students were well placed to introduce their own sensitive disability-related topics solely on their own terms. It was notable that one member of the group did this from an early stage: a young man, Sam, whose family had experienced great difficulty in getting his social and educational needs recognised, and therefore met, for many years. As such, his more politicised views on disability were apparent from the start, allowing him to confront sensitive issues on a referential basis with a considerable degree of anger, as well as humour. Chief among the issues he raised were the substantial degrees of segregation and isolation he had faced in his school life and the anger he expressed about his mother's futile struggle to get a

statement of educational<sup>3</sup> need for him. Referring to himself as unfairly treated in comparison to other disabled students in the school, who had statements and were seen as having more legitimate needs, Sam said:

When I do something similar I get really punished. They only get a warning but I get a negative in my planner and I know why I am the only pupil in the [SEN resource centre] with no statement of education.

Although his assertive manner created a little dissonance in the group, Sam's eagerness to talk about disabling educational processes enhanced the gradual movement of the other group members from the general (of the vignette) to the particular (of their own experiences).

#### **Individual judgements and moral (would/should) dilemmas**

In composing the vignettes, we made up believable scenarios, which blended the mundane with unusual or controversial behaviour, placing an individual disabled pupil at the centre of each story. The students were able to respond with confidence as Barter and Renold (1999) suggest, enabling them to give more detailed comments on the educational needs and rights of the disabled young person in the vignette. The more abstract nature of the conversation and the shifting of the locus of disability onto the young person in the vignette enabled our participants to speak more openly and to make comparisons with the practices of the school, as well as their own views on how disability should be accommodated (or not).

AW: How would you feel about it if there was a kid in the class who was always with the TA [teaching assistant]?

Jenny: I think that it's up to them whether they want a TA or not but if they don't want one they don't have to have one do they?

Sam: or maybe she needs a TA.

AW: But say you were in that position, and it was like you, think say like I've got to choose between my friends or flunking everything cos I need the help.

Sarah: then you would have the TA wouldn't you? ... They are just a person, they need extra help it's not their fault it's just a person.

VS: So you wouldn't see the TA as a barrier in any way.

Jenny: No.

AW: Do you think there is ways round it in the classroom if that happened that somebody could do something to make sure that



or statements of SEN, they illuminated how the disavowal of their value was two-fold, being neither identified as 'normal students' nor as disabled ones.

It is notable that the vignettes we created tended to be about students who had more obvious physical or sensory impairments, situations that were substantially different from those encountered by the young people in our study, who were deemed as slower learners or as students with inappropriate social and behavioural needs. This distancing or non-recognition of themselves as 'really' disabled was clear in their accounts of unfair (perceived favouritism) treatment of pupils with more obvious impairments or statements of educational need.

The excerpt below revolves around a young person in the school who was also designated as having SEN. The young people who we interviewed demonstrated intolerance and impatience with teachers' attitudes towards this pupil, who they felt received 'special treatment' and was not punished equally to other students.

*Sarah:* I think she [the teacher] feels sorry for him cos she knows he is a bit special, not special but you know what I mean so she feels sorry for him so she doesn't want to make him feel bad but he is still a person he is in Year 9, he should remember ingredients.

*Jenny:* Yeah she doesn't want to punish him cos she doesn't know how he will react. Well she is going to have to punish him sometime cos he has done something wrong he needs to be punished she shouldn't treat us differently to how she treats him.

(However, their tacit recognition of commonalities of disablement was there from the start, demonstrating the importance of exclusion on the basis of difficulty as a major point of identification. We were also able to gain a sense of significant variations in experience according to differentiated pedagogical strategies. For example, one of the students explained how the 'protective' intent of a segregated resource base failed in respect of this central purpose:

*Sam:* [The resource base] is supposed to protect students in [it] from bullying but it doesn't say anything about stopping people annoying me and there is this student called Walter and he is annoying me all the time.

Here, and elsewhere, the students were able to reveal how strategies the school had adopted to accommodate disabled students were built

on simplistic assumptions of potential dynamics between students and expectations of homogeneity between disabled students. Sam's statement indicated that although his exclusion from mainstream classes was supposed to protect him from other students, he clearly expressed that his needs remained unmet (and on other occasions stated that he did not like being segregated within the context of the school).

The development of new topics for the vignettes and the subsequent discussion over time also allowed us to gain deeper insights into the way that expectations of gender fed into processes and experiences of inclusion. This was perhaps most apparent in the ways that the young women in the study felt ignored and disregarded as less able students compared to the higher achieving 'teacher's pets' and in the reports from the young men in the study of being more likely to get into trouble for inappropriate behaviour.

The vignettes were especially valuable in elucidating these kinds of situational contexts of school culture as Barton and Renold suggest (1999), particularly as they challenged the individualism inherent within discourses of SEN and the foregrounding of specific impairment-related needs (Lewis and Norwich, 2005). They were also useful in exploring the influential variables of school, wider administrative/policy structures and the pedagogies of individual teachers from the perspectives of those who were affected by them, illustrated clearly by the students' comments about statementing and teachers' attitudes. Hence the data gathered lend weight to arguments for inclusion and a capabilities approach (Lumby and Morrison, 2009), putting the students' voices at the centre.

### Strengths, caveats and considerations

The findings of this study indicate that the young people in this sample were keenly aware of the homogenising discourse used around disability, SEN and inclusion by the school. Assumptions of similarity were made clear in teachers' treatment of pupils deemed as having SEN and the school's expectations of 'disabled' pupils. The data suggests, further, that these young people occupied a liminal place within the school, demonstrating awareness of their positioning as 'difficult' by the school, but simultaneously distancing themselves from identification as disabled. However, recognition of communality with other pupils deemed to be problematic within the school context did emerge; exclusion within the classroom context on the basis of difficulty was particularly evident as a primary point of identification.



oppressive dimensions: manifested in many educational studies of disability, particularly those that take an individualistic or deficit model of children or young people accredited with SEN (see Wilde and Avramidis (2011) for a more detailed discussion).

At the same time, these students' accounts illuminated the disabling effects of school discourses, demonstrating how (unstatemented) students attributed as having SEN are positioned as difficult and 'abnormal' subjects of education. Perceiving themselves as not competent, not 'special', not disabled, these students struggled to find an identity within the school's culture, distanced from both disabled students and their non-disabled peers. Their accounts of exclusion suggest that SEN are seen as a polarity rather than a continuum, providing a compelling case for inclusion based on the recognition of a continuum of needs, abilities, competencies and different ways of participating in learning environments and school cultures.

### Notes

1. The UK 2001 SEN Code of Practice School introduced School Action and School Action Plus, designed to provide graduated programmes of help. These are interventions provided to children who have been identified as needing 'extra' or 'different' help with learning. If School Action is insufficient, School Action Plus increases the resources available and includes direct help from external professionals.
2. In this study, multiple levels of designation of SEN were identified: 'self-perceived', 'official' and 'resourced'. While all pupils selected for participation in the study were officially designated, that is, by the school, as having SEN, none of the pupils in the sample had a statement of educational needs, that is, no resources were specifically attached to meeting their additional learning needs. All of the pupils in the sample appeared aware that they were designated as having SEN by the school, but only one of them explicitly referred to their SEN during the course of the interviews.
3. A statement of educational need is given to students who are recognised as having needs for additional resources that the school cannot meet. A statement is a lengthy, detailed document provided by the local education authority, which describes all the child's 'additional needs' and the support they should be given.

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