

Is it Ethnography? Some students' views of their experience of Secondary schooling in England

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Abstract (147 words)

The study set out to investigate how official and unofficial discourses of inclusion, engagement and discipline in schools in England at present affect the ways in which students and teachers construct their various identities. The study was carried out in one Secondary school in Middle England, UK, with 36 students in Year 9 (age 13-14 years), 3 of their class teachers, and some of the senior staff of the school. In addition to observation of students' lessons, students took photographs of their environment to situate themselves in it and provide the bases for reflexive interviews with the academic researchers. Students showed sympathy for teachers working under pressure; annoyance with other students acting in an anti-social manner; a strong sense of justice; expectation that they should be respected in the way they are treated by adults; and acceptance of the necessity of rules and punishments for rule breakers.

Keywords

Discipline; resistance; identity;

Introduction

This paper was originally entitled 'Discipline and Discontent: Some students' views of their experiences of Secondary schooling in England', but in the light of a reviewer's comment I have changed it, as it seems important to raise the question, 'Is this ethnography?' as well as trying to present some of the substantive findings of the project. My reading of the literature (Atkinson and Hammersley 1998, Hammersley, 1998, Pink, 2001, Baszanger and Dodier, 2004, Atkinson and Coffey, 2004, Flick, 2009,) suggests the methodology sits on the cusp of being an ethnographic study, in part because some of the observational data was limited in the extent of the notes taken. However the interaction of researchers with the students and teachers was in some considerable depth and through several months. So this paper will attempt to discuss its methodology as well as present some of the findings of the study in the hope of gaining some light, rather than heat, from the discussion at the end of the presentation.

In English secondary schools great emphasis has been placed on student 'voice' and inclusive education (DfES, 2004). Expectations of national policy initiatives such as School Self-evaluation and personalised learning (DCSF 2008, 2009), and Citizenship education and Every Child Matters (DfES, 2002, 2004) emphasise the importance of encouraging students to participate in school decision-making and of policy makers in schools listening to students' voices, not least as a means of improving the management of a school to better meet the learning needs of its students (Mujis et al., 2005). However, 'student voice' often becomes merely a means of achieving school improvement, rather than a matter of children's rights or of citizenship (Thompson and Gunter, 2005). Although schools are required to provide evidence of student consultation to School Inspectors, such 'consultation' seems to be largely tokenistic (Byrom *et al*, 2007). Even when students' voices are heard, greater respect is accorded to some rather than others (McGregor, 2007).

The study set out to investigate the ways in which students and teachers construct their various identities in relation to the dominant discourses and cultures of a school. In doing so the study explored the links between student identities and the development of the official and unofficial

discourses of inclusion, engagement and discipline in schools in England at present. It drew on the views of students, classroom teachers and senior staff to develop its findings. This paper presents some of the preliminary findings that arise from this ethnographic study, and questions whether the study was really ethnographic.

Conceptual framework

Students are experienced participant observers of teachers, teaching and schools (Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002). Many are able to articulate clearly what they consider to be effective and ineffective teaching and support for students, views that chime closely with the literature on effective teaching (Wragg et al., 2000, Cooper et al., 2000). The school, in the views of some of the senior staff in our study, also acknowledged, as did Fielding (2004) and Mujis et al. (2005), the importance of student voice in contributing to the effective management of schools to meet students' educational needs, especially when schools worked in economically and socially disadvantaged areas.

This paper draws on notions of discipline, power and resistance (Foucault, 1977, 1986) as well as on notions of power as a resource (Giddens, 1984, Cohen, 1989) which people use to pursue their agenda in schools (Ball, 1987) whether individually or collectively. In our study the school's rules seem to have served as coercive technologies of oppression (Foucault, 1977) which teachers used to co-opt students, as members of the school, to scrutinise their own behaviour. Such self-surveillance (Foucault 1977) applies the gaze of discipline by people to themselves. It can be construed as a less confrontational way of people with legitimate authority, such as teachers and senior staff in schools (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), exercising control (Lanski, 1974) over other participants, such as students.

On the other hand, students do construct their own perspectives on life in schools and in various ways make their voices heard despite their relative powerlessness formally (Hoyle, 1981, Busher, 2006). In the school in this study, however, it is debateable to what extent senior staff were willing to listen to students' views, as is discussed in the methodology section. It is not enough for marginalised people to make their voices clear but they also have to get their voices listened to by those with formal power, such as school Principals, in social situations (Spivak in Morton, 2003). One means of helping students to make their voices clear is through attendance at formal school arena, such as school councils, although there are doubts about the extent to which these arena really reflect student perspectives or have their agenda dominated, directly or indirectly by senior staff (Fielding 2008).

Another means is to induct students into being participant researchers in a project (Greenbank, 2003), allowing them to reflect on their own practice in school and clarifying their views of it in relation to school processes and policy contexts. This emancipatory approach can take many forms, such as developing participatory videos (Patience, 2007) or inducting students into constructing story boards or visual tours (Pink, 2009) or, in this study, scrapbooks. This allows them to (re)present themselves, individually, to a particular audience, in this case student colleagues, teachers and academic researchers in this project. The likely audience, as well as the guidance given by the academic researchers might have influenced the narratives students chose to (re)present and the images they chose to present them. To help students explicate their intended meanings in their scrapbooks they were encouraged to put labels or comments on the photographs, and to use the photographs to describe a journey around school. Constructing scrapbooks allows students to control the agenda of their presentation by first choosing what photographs they want to take. Smith (2001) and Spivak (in Morton, 2003) argue that it is very important for marginalised people to

be able to construct their own agenda in research if they are to be able to convey their own perspectives on social situations. In terms of formal power and control students are marginalised in schools, although they are able to exert power in many ways informally (Hoyle, 1981, Busher, 2006).

Methodology: a dialogue of development

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:

- Analysis of discourses of discipline, punishment and surveillance in schools (Foucault, 1977; 1976) and the ways in which this contributes to feelings of power / powerlessness amongst young people and adults
- Contrasting thematic analysis of participants' perspectives and researcher's perspectives and reflections on what was encountered in the school
- Developing visual methods for investigating participants' views / voices about schooling (Prosser, 2001; Rose, 2001)

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. Students' and teachers' views were to be 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 those of parents. This triangulation of perspectives on social and policy situations strengthens the credibility of the study by cross-referencing insider perspectives, those of the students and teachers, with those of outsider academic researchers, and the views of the formally powerful with those who were marginalised in the formal decision-making processes of a school.

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 values and perspectives on themselves in a school setting. The subject areas were chosen to facilitate access to the school: the project fitted with the National Curriculum for Y9 students of English (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 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). In addition we asked teachers to select students who were either engaged or disaffected from school, according to criteria, discussed below, derived from school documents.

Using approaches similar to those of Thomson and Gunter (2005) and Riley and Rustique-Forrester, (2002), we used participants' constructed cultural artefacts (photographs and scrapbooks) to elicit their views of themselves in school. These we analysed qualitatively and quantitatively (Rose, 2001, Wall, 2009). Visual ethnography is a well recognised group of methods (Prosser, 2009) for capturing participants' views of their experiences. We also used school documents and interviewed some senior staff to understand the official discourses and practices of the school which provided the context for students' and teachers' views.

Late in the Autumn term 2007, after the academic researchers had interviewed senior staff and collected school policy documents on inclusion and discipline, the selected students in their English and Citizenship classes were trained to be participant researchers. In four successive lessons they were given an introduction to thinking about identity, using visual methods for research, constructing a story board, capturing views of themselves in school photographically, and creating a scrapbook with the photographs. In addition they were introduced to the praxis of the ethics of visual methods, and sent out to take the photographs they had planned during one of their lessons. The scrapbooks were constructed during three lessons in January 2008 and became the property of the students as they were told when they took the photographs for them. These scrapbooks became the property of the students as they were told before they began to make them. After the academic researchers had held reflexive interviews with some of the students (17/36) in late January 2008 and made a photo record of each scrapbook, the scrapbooks were given to the students. Anecdotal evidence from teachers and students suggested the students welcomed this and saw themselves benefitting from it. This and the development of knowledge related to the formal curriculum of the school helped to give benefit to the students taking part in the research as Pink (2001) suggested research should do to be ethical.

Students were trained in the ethics of visual methods since taking any pictures round a school could involve, intentionally or unintentionally, capturing images of people. The actions of students as researchers using photography is potentially ethically problematic (Allan and Cullen, 2008) and raise questions about what documents might be ethically used and what might constitute informed consent amongst young people. The 36 13/14 year old students in our study took photographs in their Midlands multi-ethnic city school of sites and people of their choosing and then made narrative scrapbooks from them. Their English and Citizenship teachers, in whose classes we worked, asked to carry out a similar process. Photo-records can communicate the feeling or suggest the emotion imparted by activities, environments, and interactions with people and 'provide a degree of tangible detail' of these (Prosser, 2001: 116). Photo-records, like other visual displays, also embody the values and beliefs their makers hold (Howells, 2003).

The scrapbooks were intended to form the basis of some students' (and teachers') reflexive interviews with the research team to investigate students' and teachers' views of their relationships with each other and the school. As Pink (2001) points out, what is often conveyed in images is not the objects that are seen but the meanings they represent. These can only be gleaned by talking with the creators of the images about them and their intentions when constructing them. The scrapbooks generated in-depth open-ended individual interviews with 17 students drawn from across the four classes (including the SLN group) in the Spring 2008 and with three of the teachers who taught the students in the Summer 2008. Prosser (2009) describes this as photo-elicitation. A final phase of the project also used the student photographs to construct group posters to try to interrogate students' group views to see if these differed noticeably from students' individual perspectives.

Although some of the teachers in the English and Citizenship departments of the school were willing to be involved with the research, they perceived three major problems that needed to be addressed.

One was with which students to work. The second was how to collect photographic data. The third problem was that Year 9 students had to be prepared and take Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), under the English National Curriculum in late May 2008, and the performance of the school was measured on the students' performances on these. Consequently we were not able to carry out the last phase of the research until July 2008, nearly six months after the students finished constructing the scrapbooks and engaging in reflexive interviews. These demands put strains on the project budget that had not been expected. These were particularly severe in the use of time.

The first problem was that although teachers were willing to work with the researchers with Year 9 students, they 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 lessons to take part in a project. The possible alternative strategy of lunchtime 'lessons' for the project teachers thought 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.

Expanding the participation of students in each of three classes to all of the students in the class had major resource implications. It involved adjustments to the production of materials needed to train students in visual methods and ethics 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 second problem was that the teachers, despite their enthusiasm for the technological focus of the project (students using digital cameras and developing power point presentations from groups of students' photographs), pointed out that this would require them to book all 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. This 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 were banned in school in any case, which would have needed the transfer of data from camera to computer. So the research team decided to use disposable print cameras instead, an approach also discussed by Pole (2008) as a possible means of sociological data collection. Ordinary disposable cameras proved to be considerably cheaper to purchase and produced adequate photographic results which students could stick into their scrapbooks and label as they wished. 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.

The third problem that teachers identified had a considerable impact on the last phase of the project. By the time the academic research team returned to the classrooms in July, many students had lost interest or enthusiasm for the project. It seemed a distant memory to them. Consequently they tended to see the construction of the posters as an 'end of term' time filling activity, a view partially reinforced by the teachers who were busy with end of year assessments. The group posters of students' perspectives were supposed to reflect group views of disengaged or enthusiastic students in each class. In practice they reflected friendship group views. These posters the students introduced to their peers during the course of one of the last lessons of the school year. Although student groups were willing to allow us to keep the posters and a photographic record of them, many were not willing to allow us to record their spoken reports of their posters. However, these reports were often entirely descriptive of the content of the posters, so contributed little to the words and pictures used in the construction of the posters. The teachers were also entrapped in clearing up for the school year, although three of them constructed photographic scrapbooks and engaged with the academic researchers in reflexive interviews. However gaining other essential information, such as the telephone numbers of parents to be interviewed, proved impossible, as it had been earlier in the chronological year. So we were never able to triangulate students' views of the school with those of some of their parents.

The Autumn term 2008 proved to be an even less productive period. The Senior Management team of the school suddenly became nervous about the academic researchers presenting their emergent findings to the students and teachers, despite first presenting preliminary findings to some members of the senior management team and explaining the importance to the research design of checking their interpretations of what the students and teachers had said with the views of the participants. Several staff suggested that senior staff were concerned about the reputation of the school and wanted to maintain strict control over the students. Presenting findings to students seemed to be seen as a threat that would encourage student rebelliousness by giving them an arena in which they might express their positive and negative views of the school. It enhances the contention that post-colonial methodologies are an appropriate framework for applying to studies of school students' perspectives of schools, from whatever ethnic background the school students come. As Spivak (in Morton 2003) said, it is important for the subaltern not only to be able to speak in their own language, but also to be able to get the powerful to listen, too.

Preliminary Findings

Students' views on breaking rules

A lot of people smoke at [school] (OP)

Are there lots of people that go? (Res) Yes. Like, it's the older ones go first, at smoking, then some other group will come along and then another and then another. Like that (OR)

There's a hole in the fence down there which people will escape out of school and just go home, or whatever they want to do, but then, [like] you can just walk round as I say and nearly always they get away with it. I've seen them quite a few times ... There's quite a few holes in the fence – there's some further along (OP)

The hole in the fence was visible in OP's photograph

Students' views on Anti-Social behaviour (1): creating a mess

This is a picture of ... just outside of the gym. They took all the grass up – it's where we normally [like] stand and talk at lunchtime – they've took all the grass up and laid some mud down, or new grass, but it's been wrecked and now it's just [like] puddles of mud (OP)

don't like rubbish round the school? (Res) It makes the school look skunky, don't it? When visitors are coming in [like] "Look at that rubbish on the floor". I feel sorry for all the ... What's it called? ... janitors or ... There's a bin [like] there – and people can't even just put it in the bin (NH)

The above two items were observed by the academic researchers

'cos the other toilets, they don't have [like] loo roll, or soap to wash your hands, or the tap don't work to wash your hands – it's quite scammy (KY). **Why does that happen that they get into such a bad condition? (Res)** It's 'cos people can't really be bothered to look after them any more.

Toilets appeared on 10 occasions in the 167 boys' scrapbook pages and on 8 occasions in the 109 girls' scrapbook pages.

Students' views on Anti-Social behaviour (2): Violence and vandalism

Me and my mate were messing about – well, I'm not saying messing about – just going down the field and this big, massive crowd came past and somebody steps on the end and starts a fight (IA) **So it can be a bit rough? (Res)** Well, yes. 'cos kids are going to stick up for themselves if they get bullied ... (IA)

And the eighth picture is vandalism – and this is the start of the bad things about the school (AY) **What do you think about that kind of thing? (Res)** I think it's stupid, 'cos there's no point [unclear] ... If you think about it, what it just means is that you think you're hard when you're not (AY)

The evidence of Litter/ dirt/ disrepair / graffiti appeared on 33 occasions in the 167 boys' scrapbook pages and on 19 occasions in the 109 girls' scrapbook pages.

Quite a senior man in the team. He stands at the door, making sure everyone's in their uniform in the morning and if you get [caught] ... you always go to him. So everybody's [like] scared of him 'cos if they go to see him they know they're going to get yelled at, and really badly. And when he shouts, his voice goes right through you so ... it sort of does intimidate you a bit (HA)

Several students corroborated this activity by a senior member of staff

Students' views on Discipline and control

what is it you dislike about the teachers? (Res) Most of them just shout and they're mean ... it's not that you don't like them personally, it's just you don't like the way they treat you and the way that they teach the class (HA)

Several teachers were heard shouting at students and shouting at classes during the visits of the academic researchers to the school

I don't like [subject] (AK). **Why is that? (Res)** The teacher. The teacher's a bit moody. Different personalities [like] one day she'll be alright with me but be a bit sarcastic and stuff like that sometimes (AK)

you want to go to the toilet at lunch ... different one's are open at different times, so you have to run from one end of the school to the other and then you find out it's locked (OP)

Policy frameworks were part of the disciplinary contexts. Some students acknowledged that they had to pass their SATs and or their GCSEs and were grateful for teachers helping them with this.

No matter how much I dislike it, I have to do [subject] for GCSE (HA)

it's a technology college and that's why it's famous ... because it's a good technology college ... And we've got good equipment and everything (AH)

Teachers were constantly aware of the impact of policy frameworks on their work. We feel for our SATS results, threshold going through threshold is dependent on how well you do with a particular group of children. So unless you get little Jonny that level 6 for example, that could depend on whether you get another £31500 next year (EA Spr 2008 teacher)

Students' views on surveillance

What does that say? (Res) Watching you! **That's the CCTV is it?** Yes. You get no privacy in England ... everywhere you look there's a camera (IA)

The best things is that ... the teachers ... are everywhere, so, basically, there's no trouble – no trouble at all, but the bad things are is, if there were a bit more teachers on the field - 'cos people still smoke on the field, which is quite stupid (AY)

[She has] A walkie-talkie and a bunch of keys. I think she was trying to sort out a problem ... **Are the classrooms kept locked then? (Res)** Yes, so people can't go in [like] and take all stuff, whatever (KY)

They've just shut off Google, because there were things last year ... which is quite annoying. We were just told people were misusing Google (HA)

Students' views on rewards

No student mentioned the provision of rewards. However a senior member of staff commented:

there are merit stamps, and there's the planners, the merit stamps go in there ... they can get it for good behaviour, for being a good student throughout the week. They can get it for

punctuality, they can get merits of opportunity ... it's not just certificates, sometimes they get gel pens and all that stuff. The class that does the best in each year on merits gets a trip – it's next week actually (IE Aut 2007 senior staff)

Students' views on Punishment

And what happens if you're caught smoking? (Res) You're just told to move away from the building – and that's it. But if you get caught more than twice, I think you get some letters sent home or something and they show you some video on smoking (OR)

afterwards he got a detention and he was put on report for bullying, so, basically, what the report is ... is, you either get a green, orange or red report and green's [like] not – you haven't done something serious, but it can be hurtful, orange is [like] vandalism, or something like that, and red is [like] every time ... so [like] if you're on orange, it's mostly for fighting and whatever and [like] red is you do it every time, so as soon as you're off the orange report you do it again (AY)

some people are doing something wrong, and ... (OH) **And who do they get sent to? (Res)** Sometimes, if they're on Stage 5, then they have to go to Stage 5. **the room where people go when they've been in lots of trouble? (Res)** Mmm (OH)

Students' (positive) responses to discipline

you think that's a good thing if people are sent out for being naughty? (Res) Yes ... as long as they've learnt their lesson and ... know what they've done wrong, then yes (OP)

ended up in Stage 5 ... does it make you think, "I'm not doing that again"? (Res) No. No. No point in having it. [they should] Put you in a room with a proper teacher (IA)

If you've done something wrong, then you deserve to get shouted at ... sometimes he [Vice Principal] just shouts for no reason (HA) **OK. Why the big 'Grrrr' [label by photo]? (Res)** 'cos I don't like that S or T. They shout at you so much (HA)

my English teacher ... She shouts in my ear (OP). **Does she shout at you? (Res)** Not at me! At other people and it kills my ear like mad. I like it when she's calmed down (OP)

Students' responses to disciplinary agents

... Head of DT and it's kind of hard for her as well, 'cos she has to look out for [like] fights around the block ... I think, "It's not our fault. She's supposed to stay in and teach us." But it's not her fault either, is it? (AH)

Everyone has a named teacher, or a tutor, so, every morning you go to your tutor to get signed in the register and then afterwards ... if there's anything you want to talk about, they'll ask you to see if you're alright (AY)

The teachers are nice – well, some of them are – but some of them can be a bit too strict. The teaching assistants are alright (HI)

We've got our own base in DT and basically the teachers are there ... to keep an eye on you ... just in case something does happen (AY)

A student's view on a new social order?

The teachers and students should be equal, I think. Because teachers ... came to school to just teach us ... not to shout and stuff. If they wore uniforms and had to pay the same prices in school and didn't get to push in queues, I think we'd respect them more 'cos they're on our same level. I think everyone would behave better, 'cos if someone were, say, really naughty, they're not going to behave any better if the teachers shout and scream at them. They'll behave better if [like] they've got someone who knows how they're feeling and stuff (NH)

Conclusions

Students showed a clear awareness of the institutional processes of the school and how these were structured hierarchically. They welcomed the way they were treated by some teachers, but not by others. Students did not seem to question the need for social and disciplinary structures in school, a view shared with senior staff. However some students thought some of the actions of teachers generated student misbehaviour, and perceived their own actions as resistance to those.

Students' responses to discipline were ambivalent. Some complained about some types of discipline, e.g. shouting at students. Others welcomed certain types of discipline, e.g. supervision of playing fields to stop students smoking. Students were as concerned about discipline not being applied adequately to protect themselves or others from harm, as they were about discipline being applied too harshly.

Students':

- perceptiveness of teachers working under pressure
- annoyance with other students acting in an anti-social manner
- sense of justice
- expectation that they should be respected in the way they are treated by adults
- acceptance of the necessity of rules and punishments for rule breakers
- (positive) views of how discipline and punishment should be implemented in a just manner.
- 'cool' attitude to rules and punishments: Their recognition that they negotiate with the school system in order to pursue their own agenda, that only partially coincides with that of the school as institution.

The research seems to support Foucault's and Lenski's view of institutional process as a means of discipline that co-opts people into self-surveillance. This is founded on an underlying violence (Etzioni, 1961) that originates as much from the staff as the students. Students pursue their own agenda by negotiating with and through the agents of the school (Ball, 1987) developing their identities in contention with each other and in a struggle with teachers individually and as the embodiment of the school institution.

The evidence from student photographs, researchers' observations, students' reflexive interviews and the description of the methodology of the study seems to support the thesis that this was an ethnographic study. It was regrettable that the immersion of the academic researchers in the school

was to some extent fragmented by socially imposed hiatuses, such as school holidays, and the disciplinary demands of government curriculum and assessment policies. None the less between December 2007 and July 2008, the academic researchers became very familiar with the patterns of work-placed life in the school for the participants in this study.

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