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Research and student voice

Lyn Tett, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

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Introduction

This paper is written partly as a response to a critique from Sally Baker and her colleagues (2006) about an article that John Bamber and I published (Bamber and Tett, 2001) in 2001. Their critique was based on the grounds that we had developed our arguments in a way that depended 'on an assumption about the veracity of student participants [that] represents a solipsistic retreat into a state of analysis where things are the case because people say they are' (p 175). Criticism is never comfortable but it did provoke me into thinking about the nature of evidence that is derived from interviews and focus groups with students. Does this imply, as Baker and colleagues argue, that this methodology inevitably means that researchers have 'not taken a systematically sociologically informed analysis of the nature of institutions or society or the material obstacles to change but have instead relied on the subjective individualised realm of student experiences' (p 175)? I will argue that this is an over-simplistic interpretation of data that are based on students' voices and I will draw on findings from a variety of educational provision ranging from universities to informal literacy provision in community settings to examine the role of the researcher in listening to and reinterpreting the detail of people's lives. There are of course many issues raised by data derived from using student voices as a method of enquiry so I will begin with the problems raised for research that is based on listening to, and interpreting from, interviews with students.

Listening and interpreting

The methodology of drawing on the knowledge of those who have experienced an issue from the inside has been claimed to be empowering to those whose voices might otherwise be silenced. However, other researchers (e.g. Alcoff, 1991/2) have pointed out that to include hitherto silenced voices in research is not necessarily either empowering or liberating. This is not only because such inclusion may be manipulative, but also because the processes that led to the initial silencing, and then the permission to speak, are absent and therefore not open to interrogation. In addition Michael Fielding (2004, 296) has argued that as a researcher who is speaking about others:

you may, in effect, be ... speaking *for* them. The very language you use in your description is likely to be saturated with values, frequently your own. No descriptive discourse is, or can be, value-free; advocacy or interpretation is thus, to some degree and inevitably, part of your account (emphasis added).

So research that uses student voices to illuminate problems that might otherwise not be acknowledged has to take account of both the problem of speaking on behalf of others in ways that actually reflect their views and also the problem of creating an individualised and depoliticised vision of students' lives that ignores wider structural issues. This latter point is particularly problematic when student voices are homogenised and presented as if the few speak for the many without any differentiation. Bhavnani (1990) has added another dimension to this issue by pointing out that unless we are clear about who is listening, and the processes that led to the initial silencing of the others that are not heard, then the presentation of an explicit political framework is avoided with the danger that if the 'unstated voices are the voices of reaction, then these come to be celebrated in the same way as the voices of the dispossessed' (147).

An important way in which educational researchers have attempted to deal with these latter points is through situating themselves in their constructions of the research process, acknowledging the partiality of their perspective and the effects of power relations between researcher and researched. A well known example is that of Bourdieu and his team of researchers (Bourdieu et al, 1999) who, in *The weight of the world: social suffering in contemporary society*, listened attentively to the detail of people's lives in order to read the effects of 'objective relations' in the apparently idiosyncratic. They interpreted interviews not only as the expression of individualised suffering, but also as evidence of the organising, underlying and relatively systematic, principles, relations, and structures that govern particular lives. Bourdieu located the interviewees within the underlying social relations that set limits to their action and suggested that:

It is the uncovering of immanent structures contained in the contingent statements of a discrete interaction that allows one to grasp the essential of each girl's *idiosyncrasy* and all the singular complexity of her actions and reactions (Bourdieu et al, 1999: 618).

This is what I suggest researchers are doing when they interpret people's readings of their own lives as founded on patterned, socially generated, classifications of the world rather than simply reporting people's views as some kind of objective 'truth' as Baker and her colleagues (2006) seem to assume. My view is that in listening to and interpreting the voices of those that are often silenced we are operating in a way that enables us to transcend individualised practice and show how this is structurally situated.

Discursive Framing

It is important to remember, however, that research is always interpreted by policy makers within particular discursive frameworks both in terms of defining the problem and also in what the problem's potential solution might be. This problem was pointed out famously by C. Wright Mills when he argued that researchers need to operate with a sociological imagination so that they are able to distinguish between the 'personal troubles that are the result of an individual's

character and the public issues that transcend the local environments and limited range of life of an individual' (Mills 1967: 396). He suggested that for much of the time governments tend to cloak or to present public issues, such as unemployment, as private troubles. From this perspective it is the fault of individuals that they cannot find work, rather than an outcome of structural or political arrangements and thus solutions can 'slip past structure to focus on isolated situations' and therefore consider problems 'as problems of individuals' (534).

In the same way access to post-compulsory education of what ever kind is discursively framed as a series of individual problems due to 'low aspirations' 'poor attainment' 'lack of motivation' rather than as a manifestation of structural problems (e.g. CEC, 2005, DIUS, 2007; Scottish Government, 2007). In addition, as Ball (2007: 10) has argued, the role of state education in recent times has been re-articulated through the production of 'plausible new policy narratives [such as] choice, diversity and personalisation' and has been subordinated to the demands of structural competitiveness. At the same time, he suggests, policy still retains a residual set of concerns with 'the under-achievement and under-participation of some of the working class and some ethnic minorities in education' (ibid). In this discourse education is generally seen in terms of its economic value and its contribution to international market competitiveness. Even policies that are concerned to achieve greater social inclusion are modified and co-opted by the requirements of economic participation and the labour market. This transformation of social problems into economic problems is achieved through the emphasis on individual responsibilities and self-organisation particularly through the discourse of individual deficit where failure to succeed is 'blamed' on the attributes of the individual students who are regarded as being poorly prepared for learning and/or lacking in motivation and ability.

This discursive framing of the individual as a problem assumes that the solution is not to challenge structural inequalities but to work on changing the attitudes of the individual. This has particular implications for research because by concentrating on presenting findings using the voices of individual students we may inadvertently support the discursive presentation of disadvantaged students as too 'needy' and blame them for their own disadvantage. Enabling those whose voices are rarely heard to comment on their own experiences is one way of challenging this individualisation but only if those voices are socially situated.

Student Voices

In this section I am going to draw on research from three different projects (Maclachlan et al, 2008; Tett, 2004; Tett & Maclachlan, 2008) to illustrate how students' voices have been used to illustrate and illuminate issues that might not be otherwise open to view. I will start with students' experiences of schooling and how that influenced their attitudes to participating in literacies provision. This is because poor experiences of learning at school are particularly important in

influencing people's disposition towards learning and the task of overcoming this negativity should not be underestimated, for as Jonker (2005, p123) argues, 'at the individual level, schooling can offer the confidence of becoming an educated, knowledgeable person. It can also saddle one for life with the feeling that one is doomed to fail. Schooling, in other words, is part of the complex process of shaping and reshaping the self. In this research (Maclachlan et al, 2008) a saddening large proportion of the learners described very negative, damaging experiences of initial education that had caused them to have a poor sense of themselves as learners. These fragile learner identities were forged from their early days for a range of different reasons.

Tracy, for example, remembers finding it difficult at primary school. She was very slow at reading but did not feel that the teachers noticed and thought that they were '*...more interested in the bright ones, the ones that could get on... They sort of just left me to one side... I tried to do me best, but I just felt that because I wasn't bright and I wasn't brainy that people just didn't want to know.*'

Many recalled memories of bullying and harassment that affected their ability to learn because they felt neither safe nor secure in learning environments that should have nurtured, not alienated them, so they turned away from their schools either physically or psychologically. Bullying from teachers was a factor that shaped Mark's memories of education. '*In English and Math classes if you got picked on by the teacher...and when you got it wrong - you got hit. So there was fear - no one would put up their hand unless you were 100% sure, and that marks you.*'

Traumatic experiences in educational environments were not the sole causes of school failure however. Many rejected schooling because they either did not recognize its value at the time or were raised in violent, unloving homes that were neglectful of their educational and social welfare. Kate's experience exemplifies this vividly.

My Mum left when I was 6 weeks old and my dad brought me up but he re-married and I wasn't treated well by my stepmother. I don't remember any happy times, birthdays, family times, holidays or even ordinary cuddles. There was just no discipline there so I ended up going off the rails and started drinking and then I started sniffing glue.

I feel that these student voices show both the complexity and also the emotions generated by negative schooling experiences in ways that a dispassionate account of statistics cannot do.

In another project that focused on literacies learners (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008) listening to the students revealed the benefits of participating in learning as well as some of the ways in which their views can be silenced. First the following quotes from students show the ways in which they themselves felt they benefited from their courses.

At first I worked on my literacy problem in secret but now, as my confidence has grown, I am going to approach the council about the lack of facilities for young boys living in my area. Now I can be a positive role model to young men who lack confidence and focus like I used to. I'm more open to who I really am and share with others that I'm doing this course. It allows me to be myself and not hide my literacy problem. Learning helped me to realise things about myself, be more mature, make up my own mind and make good choices about how to tackle things. I can rely on myself more.

I can speak out more now because I know I can be educated. I'm happier and it's made a difference in the way I feel about everything. I get on with people better and I can show my feelings more because I've found something I'm good at.

Although the process of finding and speaking to students was quite complicated, partly due to some tutors acting as gatekeepers as a way of protecting their students, the participants were very positive about being able to tell their stories to interviewers. These students not only wanted to talk about their achievements and the changes in their lives, they also wanted to spread a very positive message about literacies learning in the wider world.

No one has really wanted to hear what I had to say before. I'm glad you want to hear my story about my life. I want to become something now—before I just thought I was a nobody.

I know that lots of people who can't read and write very well try to hide it but I want them to know that you can do it. I did it.

I don't need to hide my literacy problem any more so I'm happy to talk to you about it. I thought it would be like school but it isn't so everyone should know that.

Listening to these students also revealed how difficult it was for those who had less positive things to say about their tuition to actually speak up about it.

It was difficult to say there were things I didn't like about my class to my tutor because she is so kind to me so I'm glad I could tell you.

I want to tell you how bad things are here—we have the worst classrooms and the worst tutors because everybody thinks we're crap.

This research I feel has revealed the importance of getting the views of participants and how common the discourse of deficit is even from tutors working in this area.

The final example is from research (Tett, 2004) into non-traditional students in University that drew on the experiences of two cohorts of mature students to examine the discourses used to explain their exclusion and choice. These students pointed out that they were often described as lacking – qualifications,

understanding and knowledge – whereas they actually had many things to offer. For example:

We can be a role model to those we are working with as they see that if we can go on to university, then it's not just for the 'wee swots'.

People from my area don't go to university but we're breaking the mould and still being accepted because we're streetwise to what's going on in the area.

I bring my experience of being working class [to the course] and I know that means that I have something important to offer...Being working class isn't just about being "deprived".

However, the very different circumstances they experienced marked them out and sometimes made it difficult to assert their positive experience. For example: 'Standing in the line to get my matriculation card and seeing all those other students with really expensive trainers I knew I shouldn't be here'. Another described tutorial groups where 'they were all English and couldn't understand my [Scottish] accent' and another suggested that 'they all seem dead clever. It makes me feel ignorant and afraid to open my mouth'.

The students also contrasted their own socio-economic circumstances with their fellow students: 'they all seemed to have enough money not to need to work but I had to and it meant I just didn't have enough time for things like spending time in the library'. Another talked about the different home circumstances she experienced. 'I just don't have a place to work. I had to move back into my mums' house and she's only got the one spare bedroom so I'm sharing that with the two kids. The television's always on in the living room and I can't work at the library because I've to get home for the kids'. For another there was pressure from home 'my mum thinks I should be at home looking after my kids but they all seem to have parents that spend loads of money on them'.

The financial difficulties alone were a crucial factor in their experience of learning as the pressures of work seriously undermined their engagement with their studies. For example:

It's a constant struggle between looking after the kids, work and study. I sometimes have to do my [University] work from eleven at night till four thirty in the morning. Then I have a quick sleep, then breakfast, get the kid's to school and then off to work. That's what a day's like for me. It's hard but you've got to do it'.

Finally a student really sums up the factors that need to be taken into account if the entrenched inequalities in participation in, and across, HE are to be properly addressed and systematically dismantled.

If you want people to succeed you have to make sure that the structures are in place for that to happen. There needs to be a little more flexibility within that, more resources, more support.

Conclusion

The word limit of this paper has not made it possible to discuss the ways in which the problems raised earlier about speaking *for* students in ways that may reflect the researcher's views rather than those who have been hitherto silenced have been addressed in the research projects on which I have reported. What I have shown, I hope, is how students' voices can, if properly situated within the literature and wider structural contexts, illustrate solutions to public issues from an insider perspective. What is vital, however, is that researchers articulate very clearly why particular solutions, which require considerable resources being invested in provision for the most disadvantaged, are necessary and are careful that our use of student voice does not lead to policy solutions that focus on individualistic solutions. Instead we must demonstrate how existing socio-economic structures set limits to the action of individuals and make it extremely difficult for them to engage in post-compulsory education. We also need to show how, although experiences of schooling may belong to the past, they still orient a vision of the potential educational future that sets limits on what is seen as possible and so make many apparently open 'choices' particularly risky.

If researchers scrutinise social policy from a social justice perspective that understands that systemic inequalities cannot be fixed by solutions at the individual level then we can go some way towards providing some really useful research on what factors impact on participation in post-compulsory education. This means that we need to approach research as an 'act of repositioning' that 'in essence says that the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies and practices does, is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power' (Apple, 2006: 229).

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