

Engaged voices' – dialogic interaction and the construction of shared social meanings

'The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself.' (bell hooks, 1994:11)

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Abstract

The notion of 'pupil voice' reproduces the binary distinction between adult and child, pupil and teacher and therefore serves to reinforce 'conventional' constructions of childhood. The concept of 'voice' invokes an essentialist construction of self that is singular, coherent, consistent and rational. It is arguably more useful to reflect on self and identity as socially constructed, hybrid and multiple. This paper will critically interrogate 'pupil voice,' offering instead the notion of the 'engaged voices' of children and adults, students and teachers, operating within an intertextual, highly provisional discursive space. The paper will use Bakhtin and Voloshinov's theories, arguing that dialogism provides the basis for an exploration of the construction of shared social meanings which replaces idealist and psychologist location of meaning in the individual psyche or self. The paper will focus on the 'social event[s] of verbal interaction' as sites of struggle of different social languages and ideological belief systems (*heteroglossia*) in the production of shared social meanings. In this process of the making and negotiating of shared social meanings, we move imperfectly towards jointly conceived understandings of personhood and community.

Preface

The ideas in this paper emerge from a personal and professional struggle. I worked in mainstream schools with young people labelled as having 'emotional and behavioural difficulties' - the young people whose voices often go unheard, are ignored or are silenced, sometimes because their voices are deemed to be 'unacceptable.' Within the context of working in schools, an uncomfortable question arose for me repeatedly with a few – certainly not all – young people, including some young people who were considered to be 'good' and 'able' students: how do I engage with racist, sexist and homophobic views? This is an enormously complex question for me as a teacher and a person who grew up in apartheid South Africa. In schools, the received view is 'zero tolerance' of racism, sexism or homophobia. Is it meaningful or respectful simply to tell young people that they are not allowed to have (or at least to voice) these views? How does this help to unpick complex ideological constructions and received views? What happens when we tell young people that they are not allowed to hold these views? Do they simply comply with their school's or society's disapproval? In thinking and beginning to theorise about this, I realised that I was offering a critique of the received notions of 'pupil voice,' currently moving to centre stage in UK policy. I realised too that my critique has implications for myself as an adult and a teacher in terms of thinking critically about my own 'voice' and identity, how I hold power and how I represent (speak on behalf of?) children and young people. I realise that these are not safe or predictable issues. While I think I have developed some successful dialogic practices, I am interested in knowing more about what dialogic spaces look like in practice and how teachers and students are creating these.

Introduction

The current policy position in England in relation to children and young people's participation is constructed around the notion of 'voice.' The statutory guidance (DfES, 2004) requires headteachers, governors and local education authorities to 'give children and young people a say.'¹ More recently the Children Act 2004 has legislated that local authorities must give children and young people a say in the development of the statutory children and young people's plans. The new self-evaluation framework for schools requires schools to evaluate how they gather the views of children and young people and how they take action on these views. Notions of 'pupil voice' and its benefits are becoming dominant in the United Kingdom. The focus on voice is built on the 'common sense' position that if one wants to know what children want, the simple and obvious solution is to ask them and they will 'give voice' to their views.

However, embedded in this common sense position are some powerful assumptions that ironically contribute to the absenting of children's voice and power. The focus on pupil voice is predicated on maintaining the binary distinction between adult and child, teacher and pupil. I want to explore two positions in pupil voice practices. The first position assumes that 'voice' is a tool to enable the child to progress towards rationality. In the second position, the concept of 'voice' assumes that children will freely articulate a spontaneous, coherent, consistent and *unadulterated* position, entirely consistent with their individual conscience and their own interests. It assumes that children and young people are non-ideologically constructed subjects who are free to represent their own interests transparently. It is these two positions that will be interrogated in the course of this paper, which puts forward an alternative position based on Bakhtin and Volshinov's² philosophy of language and theories of dialogic interaction. The first section of the paper engages with contested constructions of childhood. The paper then offers a critique of voice/ speech based in semiotics and theorists whose ideas, while starkly different, are connected by a philosophy of language based on Marxist ideology.

Binary distinction between adult and child – contested constructions of childhood

Binary distinctions always assume a power relation in which one term is privileged – in the case of adult and child, it is the adult. The received and largely hegemonic view of childhood is located in a liberal mythology based in the philosophical ideas of

¹ The statutory guidance proposes that this is in line with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In fact, the right in law set out in Article 12 states that 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.' Arguably, the statutory guidance does not reflect the spirit of this *entitlement in law*. It merely encourages the involvement of children and young people. Lundy (2006, in press) argues that the notion of student 'voice' is an inadequate concept for understanding and protecting the full legal rights of children and young people, as set out in Article 12.

² On the highly contested question of Voloshinov and Bakhtin's authorship of the publications on which this paper draws, I follow Matejka and Titunik's position that *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* is attributable to Voloshinov and *The Dialogic Imagination* to Bakhtin.

Rousseau and Locke. For Rousseau, the family predates civil society and paternal authority is understood as natural. Locke too suggests that paternal authority is natural until the child reaches adulthood (Elshtain, cited in Marshall, 1996:94).

The child is thus in a special relationship to both the state and the family in that the child is understood as not yet having acquired rationality. Both educational and parental philosophies in the twentieth century have drawn on Rousseau's notions set out in *Emile* in 1762 (Rousseau, 1956), of the child as natural. In opposition to earlier more authoritarian views of the child, child-centred parenting and child-centred education are understood as producing a subject with emerging rational capacities rather than mere obedience. The child is expected to flourish within a controlled but enabling environment where choice is significant and where the child's immanent rationality will unfold through exploration and self expression. (Marshall, 1996: 94)

From within this social construction of childhood, the authority of the teacher to support and unlock the immanent rationality of the child (*in loco parentis*- in the place of the parent) is imbued with social legitimacy. What implications does this liberal mythology of childhood have for giving children and young people a say? Giving children and young people a say is a form of benevolent paternalism, a tool to enable the child to progress towards rationality through self expression. But the voice of the *not yet rationale* child can never, from within this liberal hegemonic position, be a force for real social change – it is simply a means to a rather dubious end.

Another view

Many advocates of pupil voice explicitly reject this view, putting forward an alternative position based in a discourse of *rights*. Advocates of this position interrogate the power relations inherent in these 'naturalised' relations. Qvortrup argues that: 'Questioning the principal of ontological differences between adults and children is a challenge to the ideological foundation for adults' 'natural' right to exert power over children' (Qvortrup, 1995: 3 cited in Marshall, 1996: 95). From within this position,

A key role is given to the *authentic* voice of children as a resource for criticism of existing conditions of childhood. The child is understood as active by virtue of humanist assumption of children's intrinsic, natural capabilities that are obscured by adult defined conditions and beliefs. Children's subjectivity is framed largely in oppositional terms to the identified ideology. (Marshall, 1996: 97, my italics)

Marshall (1996) argues that this too involves romanticising the child as naturally competent and reasonable, rather than incompetent and irrational. I am interested in how this position which claims an 'authentic' yet isolated and entirely 'monologic' voice for the child assumes an essentialist notion of identity in which voice gives direct access to the fully present, coherent and rationale self. In arguing for the right of children and young people to a voice, an attempt is made to reverse the binary distinction between child and adult – to redress the power balance; but power always already operates within this relation. We cannot escape the binary relation. In seeking to privilege the disempowered half of the binary relation, we are simply trying to render the place of the adult (in listening to and or representing/ speaking for) - and therefore the operations of power - invisible. I will return to the issue of power later. First, I want to offer a critique of the notion of 'voice.'

A critique of voice/speech³

Derrida's analysis of the phonic sign (speech) and the graphic sign (writing) is by now well known. Derrida argues that western philosophy of language 'confine[s] writing to a secondary and instrumental function: translator of the full speech that was fully present' (Derrida, 1976: 8).

It is not by chance that the thought of being [in Heidegger's sense]... is manifested above all in the voice: in a language of words. The voice *is heard* (understood) - that undoubtedly is what is called conscience - closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier: pure auto-affection that necessarily has the form of time and which does not borrow from outside itself in the world or in 'reality,' and any accessory signifier, any substance of expression foreign to its own spontaneity. It is the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously, from within the self, and nevertheless, as signified concept, in the element of ideality or universality. (Derrida, 1976: 20)

Derrida calls this privileging of voice/ speech in western philosophy phonocentrism: 'absolute proximity of the voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning' (1976: 12). He argues for a 'new situation for speech (1976: 8) where it is no longer viewed as the privileged sign of self, in the Cartesian sense where self is conceived of as a unified, coherent and always-present individual consciousness.

A new situation for voice/ speech

Drawing on studies in semiotics, Bakhtin and Voloshinov also reject idealist and psychologist location of meaning in the self or psyche. Voloshinov proposes that the concept of the sign provides the basis for a sociological understanding of individual consciousness:

Idealism and psychologism alike overlook the fact that understanding itself can come about only within some kind of semiotic material (e.g. inner speech), that bears upon sign, that *consciousness itself can arise and become viable only in the material embodiment of signs*. (1973: 11, original italics)

In identifying inner speech as semiotic material - as a dialogue between the subjective and the social - the spoken word cannot be the spontaneous utterance of the ever-present self. Voice is always already filled with social-ideological content, and includes the sediments of historical ideologies and received views.

Whereas Derrida is primarily interested in the infinite play of signs and *trace* - 'the French word carries strong implications of track, footprint, imprint (1976: xv) - Bakhtin/ Voloshinov locate speech (one sign leading indefinitely to another) in the social.

The structure of the sign is There is neither a first nor a last word determined by the trace or track and there are no limits to the dialogic of that other which is forever context (it extends into the boundless

³ I use voice and speech simultaneously as I am interested in the social event of verbal interaction rather than physiological or psycho-physiological functions.

absent. This other is of course never to be found in its full being. As even such empirical events as answering a child's questioning or consulting the dictionary proclaim, one sign leads to another and so on indefinitely

(Spivak in Derrida, 1976: xvii)

past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalised, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent development of the dialogue. (Extract from *Estetika*: cited in Holoquist, 2002: 39)

In juxtaposing *Grammatology* with *Dialogism* I am not suggesting that Spivak (interpreting Derrida) and Bakhtin are making the same philosophical point, although I have argued for shared interests – they are influenced by radically different philosophical traditions at different historical moments (no matter, the author is always already dead). In the spirit of the endless play of signs within the limitless dialogic context, I place the two quotations (these two powerful philosophical 'voices') alongside each other to offer a new situation for voice/ speech – a situation in which voice/speech as sign leads endlessly to other signs in a limitless dialogic context in which the *trace* of our sedimented histories and ideological constructs abides. 'Voice' can never give presence to full being.

The need for a new situation for voice/ speech in our work with children and young people

So why do we need this new *semiotic* situation for voice/ speech in our work with children and young people? I will explore three reasons:

- We must both acknowledge and resist 'voice work' as a technology of power;
- We must challenge benevolent paternalism and tokenism;
- We need a way of understanding how to work with 'sedimented' histories.

It is not good enough to render the place of the adult either 'natural' or invisible. The operation of power in the first case is normalised and in the second erased. As we have seen, normalising liberal mythology about adult/ child relations leads to paternalism and tokensim. Erasing the place of the adult leads to questionable assumptions about the child's ability to represent their own interests. This creates a particular problem when we are confronted with sedimented histories of prejudices, contradiction-ridden and embattled racist, classist, sexist or homophobic views. Bakhtin argues that any utterance is 'entangled, shot-through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgements and accents (Bakhtin, 1981: 276). Would we as adults and teachers remain silent when confronted by views and voices that we find difficult, abhorrent even? It would certainly be difficult to continue to hold on to a view of the child's authentic and unadulterated voice, consistent with their own conscience. In such circumstances, do we revert to a liberal mythology of the child's irrationality? We need another situation for voice – a different understanding that allows for an analysis of the complex ways in which we as adults participate in a dialogue with children. Instead of rendering the position of the adult invisible (we are neither silent nor invisible when we 'give children and young people a say'), we must, in Spivak's words, 'learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for)' the historically muted subject – in this case, the child.

We have established that our power as adults is neither natural nor invisible/ absent. We too are ideologically constructed subjects and we do not hold power in a simple way. We are regulated in complex discursive practices. Foucault argues that power is

relational and flows dynamically through discursive practices.⁴ In acknowledging that 'voice work' is a technology of power, we also acknowledge that discursive practices are not so much repressive as *productive*. By understanding the 'productive' nature of discourse and power, and that our subjectivities are ideologically constructed, we can through the social event of verbal interaction, struggle towards shared social meanings.

Speaking to/ with

Voloshinov is interested 'not in the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psychophysiological act of its implementation, but the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances' (1973: 94). Importantly for Bakhtin, an utterance is always *orientated towards an answer*.

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by social ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance, it cannot fail to become an active participant in a social dialogue... The word in living conversation is directly blatantly, orientated toward a future answer-word: it provokes the answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. (Bakhtin, 1981: 276)

This anticipation of an utterance towards an answer is about understanding. For Bakhtin, understanding is active and 'engaged' – 'understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other.' (Bakhtin, 1981:). The speaker counts on this engaged and active understanding.

Ideological becoming and the construction of shared social meanings

Within this active and engaged process of understanding, Bakhtin argues that an individual's 'becoming' or growing is an ideological process in which two discourses perform: authoritative discourses and internally persuasive discourses. Authoritative discourse is religious, political, moral; the word of the father, of adults of teachers (Bakhtin, 1981: 342). Utterances spoken from within an authoritative position are, in a sense, in quotation marks – they remain sharply demarcated. They are also difficult to engage with in an act of understanding as they are calcified and remain as sediments within our discursive identities. However, when someone else's discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us, entirely different possibilities open up:

The tendency to assimilate others' discourse takes on an even deeper and more basic significance in an individual's ideological becoming, in the most fundamental sense. Another's discourse performs here no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth – but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behaviour; it performs here as *authoritative discourse*, and an *internally persuasive discourse*...(Bakhtin, 1981: 342)

Such discourse is of decisive significance in the evolution of an individual consciousness (Bakhtin: 1981: 345). This position has important implications for our

⁴ There is a danger – a pitfall - that 'voice work' in schools becomes simply an instrument of discipline and surveillance, but this is the subject of another paper.

work with children and young people: it is through a dialectical or dialogic process that we open ourselves to mutual internally persuasive discourses in which the sediments of authoritative utterances of each participant in the dialogue can be exposed, as we struggle to create new ways of being. Importantly, this is a *creative and productive* process. Bakhtin says: 'It's creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organises masses of our words, from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition' (Bakhtin: 1981: 345).

In this sense, dialogism is an index of social change:

Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values. The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean*. (Bakhtin, 1981: 346)

As teachers and students, it is therefore important that our new situation for voice is open and dialogic so that we are able to reveal and create – to struggle for - ever newer ways to mean.

Emerging methodological pre-requisites

Thus, I offer four methodological pre-requisites for this new situation for voice:

- Our voices (adults and children and young people) are not the pure expression of individual consciousness, 'full being' or 'self'; they are the complex products of past meanings and sedimented histories enacted within a dialogic context;
- The dialogic context exists in space/ time and is therefore located in a material reality and cannot be divorced from it;
- We are regulated in complex discursive practices and technologies of power, but we can find ways of speaking together that are internally persuasive and contribute to our shared ideological becomings;
- The social event of verbal interaction is therefore essential in moving imperfectly towards shared social meanings.

A politics of hope

In offering this new situation for voice, I want to join with other voices, particularly those of bell hooks (to whom I make reference in my title), Michael Fielding and Terry Wrigley in creating a politics of hope.

Fielding writes: 'The schools for which I am arguing are places that involve young people in reflection an dialogue, places where our humanity emerges from and guides our learning together' (2005: ?).

Wrigely argues for schools of hope in which we move forward

with hopeful determination. Those who are seeking to make schools better and more powerful sites for education need to engage in a philosophical debate about educational aims and values, curriculum and pedagogy. This necessarily involves thinking about the kind of world we hope to live in. We need a new direction for improvement...which can focus on social justice and global citizenship, which is future orientated and genuinely transformational. Wrigley, 2003: 43)

The kind of schools that I am arguing for will be dialogic spaces where we struggle together to create ever newer meanings that reflect the kind of communities – and the kind of world - we want to live in.

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