**We may be listening but are we ready to hear? A reflection of the challenges encountered when seeking to hear the educational experiences of excluded young people within the confines of the English education system**

**Abstract**

When undertaking research with young people in educational contexts researchers are likely to encounter many challenges. This paper is a discussion of the barriers encountered by a researcher who sought to capture the educational journeys of excluded young people. The study aimed to move beyond young people simply participating in research to develop innovative and creative research methods to empower them to share their stories. Whilst there is increased recognition of the need to listen to the voices of young people, adults need to be willing to hear. This paper will include a reflection of the role adults can play in silencing the voices of young people. There will be a particular focus on the ethical dilemma’s encountered specifically the role of gatekeepers, location of the study, whose voices are being heard and the role of the researcher. Young people have a desire to be heard, although researchers can seek to provide space for stories to be shared, they need to acknowledge the ‘messiness’ that comes with voice research and to be reflexive in their accounts of the research process. This paper will offer a reflection of the lessons learnt on a journey into the realm of pupil voice.

**Key words: pupil voice, innovative and creative methods, exclusion, ethics and power relations**

**Introduction**

Despite increased recognition of the importance of seeking the perspectives of young people within the confines of the English education system (Caslin, 2021; Sellman, 2009; Sheffield & Morgan, 2017), there is a group of young people who present researchers with particular challenges when seeking to ensure their voices are heard. The focus of this paper will be on a research study which sought to capture the educational experiences of young people who have been excluded from school due to the behaviours they displayed in the classroom. There are a range of labels that will be attached to this group of young people including Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD). These labels shape how young people will be responded to by the adults who surround them. They are said to be the least liked group of pupils within the English education system which leads to a range of mechanisms being employed to remove them (Caslin, 2021). This paper will focus on the experiences of young people who have been permanently excluded from mainstream education. Power and Taylor (2020) highlight the need to broaden our definition of school exclusion and take into consideration the widespread use of other forms of exclusion – variously termed ‘illegal’, ‘unofficial’ or ‘informal’. The young people whose voices are shared in this study have experienced them all. The research hoped to gain an insight into how young people experience the process of exclusion by working with them to develop innovative and creative methods to capture their journeys. The research draws on disability studies to highlight how this group of young people are disabled due to the way they are responded to within an education system that has been socially constructed (Caslin, 2014; Goodley, 2017; Joseph, 2020). The research aimed to shift the focus away from the disabled young person being perceived as ‘the problem’ to demonstrate how they are instead being failed by the education system. Due to the position this group of young people occupy both within society and more specifically within the education system they have been deemed unworthy of a voice (Nind, et al, 2012; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Fleming, 2013). This paper seeks to critically reflect on the challenges of not just passively listening but really hearing the important messages young people want to share. For the purposes of this paper moving beyond listening involves taking account in meaningful ways the voices of young people (Roberts, 2017).

***The ‘problem’ pupil***

The labels that are attached to this group of pupils are in a constant state of flux and have included maladjusted, Emotional Behavioural Difficulties (EBD), and Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) (Caslin, 2019; Stanforth and Rose, 2020). All the young people in this study will have had these labels attached to them. When young people acquire such labels, it leads to adults having preconceived ideas about how they will be in the classroom, the labels serve to ‘other’ young people as they do not conform to how young people should behave with an educational environment (Holt, 2016; Armstrong, 2018). The use of the term ‘other’ here refers to how the language we use to describe disruptive behaviour leads to this group of young people being seen as somehow different to their peers, creating a binary of ‘them’ and ‘us’. Any behaviour which is deemed to fall outside of hegemonic notions of the ‘ideal pupil’ is considered disruptive and therefore subject to punishment whilst school systems and procedures remain unaltered and unquestioned (Tarabini, Jacovkis & Montes, 2018). The focus is placed on ‘fixing’ the pupil to fit in with educational expected norms (Goodley, 2017; Timimi 2010; Holt 2016). The employment of such labels leads to young people being perceived as being the ‘problem’ rather than having a problem (Heary and Hennessy, 2005). The young person becomes reduced to and defined by the label, the ‘problem’ is within them (Caslin, 2019). The adults who surround the child are then alleviated of any blame as our response is to focus on the individual pupil. This study was firmly located within the field of disability studies and aimed to take a social model approach. This meant moving away from a medical model understanding of behaviour, where the young person has a problem that requires fixing to instead turn to explore the impact of social structures such as the education system (Caslin, 2021; Goodley, 2017; Joseph, 2020). There is research which highlights the importance of acknowledging the young person’s wider social circumstances, for example the roles adults play in contributing to the behaviours that are displayed in the classroom (Armstrong, 2018; Caslin, 2019; Hajdukova et al., 2014). Yet we remain focused on punishing the young person.

In England since 2012 we have witnessed a steady increase in the number of young people who are excluded from the classroom which suggests that teachers are becoming less tolerant of behaviours that do not conform to our expectations of how young people should be in a school environment (Holt, 2016; Timimi, 2010; Caslin, 2021). This is not to blame teachers; they are subject to an education system which has been criticised for prioritising standards over student wellbeing. Through government policy teachers are encouraged to remove pupils who do not offer financial gain or reward (Adams, 2008: Joseph, 2020). To some extent then teachers are constrained by the government agenda of the day, the current Conservative government made clear their plans to empower teachers to deal with ‘problem’ pupils. This is evident in government documentation such as ‘Behaviour and discipline in schools: advice for headteachers and school staff’ (DfE 2016, p.7) which states ‘Teachers can discipline pupils whose conduct falls below the standard which could reasonably be considered of them’. Close examination of educational policies and the language used within further reinforce the idea that it is the child who is at fault. Rather than being encouraged to reflect on their own practices teachers are being encouraged to take a utilitarian approach to education (Caslin, 2021; Parker and Levinson, 2018). They can justify the removal of the ‘problem’ pupil by arguing that it is for the greater good of the class. Yet for that pupil, being excluded from school is likely to have detrimental impact on their future outcomes, with research highlighting such young people are more likely to have lower status occupations, less stable career patterns, greater unemployment and are more likely to go to prison when compared to their peers (Taylor, 2012; McCluskey et al., 2016; Timpson, 2019). The processes employed to ‘deal’ with this group of young people has led to them not only being perceived as unworthy of educational support but also unworthy of having their voices heard (Fleming, 2013; Quinn & Owen, 2016).

Evidence suggests that these young people are amongst the least listened to, least empowered and least liked group of students (Dimitirellou & Male, 2020), and the most likely to be at the receiving end of punitive and exclusionary practices (Caslin, 2021). Yet research also highlights the positive impact listening to young people can have not only on the young person but also on their educational environment (Sellman, 2009; Sheffield & Morgan, 2017; O’Connor et al., 2011). Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of listening to young people whilst also acknowledging the challenges of conducting pupil voice research (Cook-Sather, 2006; Ahmed Shafi, 2020; Scott-Barrett, Cebula & Florian, 2019). Researchers are being encouraged to acknowledge the ‘messiness’ that comes with voice research (Facca et al., 2020), and that there is a need to be reflexive and critical in your accounts of the processes adopted to hear the voices of young people (Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020). This becomes particularly important when working with disabled young people as there has been a dominance of top-down research practices (Liddiard et al., 2018). In terms of researcher positionality, it was made clear from the outset to all involved that this piece of research was about exploring the structures that surround the young person, with a particular focus on their educational experiences. There is increasing recognition and acceptance that young people’s views and perspectives need to be heard (Ruddock & Flutter, 2004; Caslin, 2019: Ahmed Shafi, 2020; Scott-Barrett et al., 2019). However, there are concerns that the term pupil voice has been hijacked by the Government to promote an adult agenda rather than to empower young people to have a say on educational matters (Thomson & Gunter, 2006; Harris & Davidge, 2019). This paper will now turn to explore how notions of voice have been interpreted with the English education system.

***Notions of voice in a school context***

The publication of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) is seen as a key development in advocating the voice of the child. Within government legislation we have witnessed increased recognition of the importance of including the voices of young people, for example the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2014). Many of these policies specifically mention Article 12 of the UNCRC emphasizing the importance of young people having an active role in all decision-making processes. However, the way in which the UNCRC has been interpreted within the UK has received criticism. A report in 2016 by the Committee on the Rights of the Child indicated that many disabled young people do not believe their views are being given due weight with regard to decisions about their future and the support they should be entitled to (Dimitirellou & Male, 2020). In addition, research highlights that it is the parents who will often speak on their child’s behalf (Harris & Davidge, 2019). This may be due to how young people come to be perceived because of the labels they have acquired (Caslin, 2019). As noted earlier, labels can shape adult perceptions with some young people being deemed incapable or not mature enough to have their say (Fleming, 2013; Quinn & Owen, 2016). This can lead to professional voices dominating any discussions that occur around the educational needs of young people who have been removed from the classroom. It is adults then who control how and if voices are to be heard. Bourke and Loveridge (2018) note how ‘othered’ voices can be ‘diluted’ due to the number of adult voices who have a key role in determining their educational journey. Voice then does become a social construct and researchers such as Komulainen (2007) have warned against too simplistic a usage of the term. Instead, researchers need to critically reflect on how it is interpreted and their own positionality. UNCRC is now over 30 years old and there are clearly still concerns in how far we have come in truly hearing the pupil voice.

The degree to which pupil voice has been embraced by both the Government and schools is questionable. In many cases the level of participation afforded to pupils will be dependent on adult interruptions and it would seem the articulation of pupil voice, the notion of increasing children’s rights has not been universally applauded. Indeed, literature has highlighted adult concerns, mainly teachers, of placing too much emphasis on the voice of the child (Sargeant, 2017; Mayes et al., 2020). Teacher apprehension towards pupil voice has been linked to a greater emphasis being placed on accountability within the classroom. Within the current culture of high scrutiny, teachers may also feel reluctant to share what little power they do have (Bragg, 2007; Sellman, 2009; Whitty and Wisby, 2007). Teachers are anxious that listening to pupils will unleash “a barrage of criticism” (Ruddock & Flutter, 2004 p. 75). In addition, how pupil voice is interpreted, will to some extent, be dependent on attitudes of teachers towards their pupils. If they have negative preconceived notions, as some do towards pupils who have been excluded, this may limit their ability to really hear what pupils have to say (Sargeant, 2017; Dimitirellou and Male, 2020). The focus of the research was on the young persons embodied experience of an education system which seeks to remove them, an opportunity for young people to share their stories. However, to hear their voices, the researcher had to navigate the spaces they occupy which are controlled by adults. The challenges of conducting research within educational contexts is widely acknowledged with Cook-Sather (2006, p. 381) arguing that ‘because schools are set up on premises of prediction, control, and management, anything that challenges those premises is hard to accomplish’. The following section will provide an overview of the processes adopted throughout this piece of research.

**Research process**

The paper is a based on a study which sought to capture the educational journeys of 13 young people who had been removed from the education system due to the behaviours they displayed in the classroom. The study aimed to gain a detailed insight into how the exclusion process is experienced by young people. Although adult initiated, the study attempted to move away from traditional methods of data collection to include young people in the decision-making processes. From the outset it was important to ensure the research moved beyond young people simply participating in the research to them working with the researcher to explore and analyse data that had relevance to them and their everyday lives (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018). The author worked alongside the pupils to develop the research methodology for the study. The young people helped to decide the focus of the research, the methods employed and what stories would be shared. Although the study began with well-meaning intentions this paper will reflect on some of the mechanisms that can work to silence the voices of young people.

At the beginning of the project the researcher approached several educational settings based within the North West of England that work with young people who have been excluded from school due to the behaviours they displayed. As with many school-based projects the researcher was reliant on adult gatekeepers to access the voices of young people. The researcher worked within three different educational provisions all outside of mainstream schooling over the period of one academic school year. This was to reflect the chaotic nature of the young person’s journey through education with research suggesting that once excluded pupils are likely to encounter a wide range of provisions (Gazeley, 2010; Pirrie et al., 2011; Caslin, 2019). Although the study focused on the voice of the young person to gain a more detailed insight into the young person’s educational experiences their teachers and parents/carers were also invited to take part in interviews.

**Please insert Table One: Details of Participants**

The young people who participated in the study were aged between 14-16 years old. These young people will have had significant experience of schooling and all had experienced a range of different educational provisions. The central focus of this study was to hear the voices of young people, however, it was also considered important to gain a more detailed understanding of their educational journeys by speaking with the adults who surround them. This provided an important insight into how notions of voice have been interpreted and how this groups of young people are perceived and responded to by adults. The following section will provide an insight into the research processes adopted for this study.

**Stages of the research process**

There were four main stages to the research process, these are outlined below;

***Stage one – meeting the young people***

Prior to any data collection taking place the researcher attended each provision to get to know the young people in the hope of building trusting relationships. From the outset of the study one of the biggest challenges was to address inherent power imbalances that are present when conducting research in educational environments. This is particularly important when working with excluded young people (Nind, et al, 2012; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Fleming, 2013). It was vital from the very first meeting with the young people to make clear that the purpose of the project was to hear their stories and place them as the expert. The English education system is premised on the belief that young people need to be contained and controlled and there is little room to disrupt this status quo (Adams, 2008 Holt, 2016; Armstrong, 2018) however the focus of this research project was to work with young people to challenge the current system and explore what needs to be disrupted to ensure we have a more inclusive education system. Within the classroom setting the experiences of young people who do challenge the status quo has resulted in them being punished and removed (Caslin, 2021) so making this adjustment to being on an equal footing with the adult in the room may feel very unfamiliar (Bradbury-Jones, Isham and Taylor, 2018). The researcher needed to spend time with the young people, so that they understood that this was a safe space to share their stories. This is clearly very difficult to achieve, with previous researchers warning that it may not be possible to ever achieve due to research taking place in adult controlled spaces such as a classroom (Cook-Sather, 2006; Sellman, 2009). Prior to any data collection taking place the researcher attended each of the provisions on several occasions to get to know the young people, explore potential research methods and just make sure they were clear on all the research processes. In addition, it was vital to develop trusting relationships with the adults who surround the young people to alleviate any concerns about the nature of the research. The researcher spent several months working within each of the settings. This paper will reflect on the experiences within each of the different settings. Throughout the process it became clear that some of the adults working in the educational provisions were more wary in their engagement with the researcher and the research process. As discussed earlier in the paper this may be due to the pressures that are placed on teachers due to the current education system being driven by accountability and performativity (Bragg, 2007; Sellman, 2009; Whitty and Wisby, 2007).

Through conversations with young people, we were able to identify the focus of the research and what methods would be used. They decided how and when they would like to participate. The young people were able to decide which day and time the researcher met with them. We decided we would start by meeting in groups and then move to individual sessions to gain a more detailed insight into each person’s journey. The two main approaches to data collection are outlined below.

***Stage two – activity sessions***

The researcher worked with the young people to design and develop a series of activity sessions. During our initial discussions we explored a range of mechanisms for capturing their discussions, the research drew on O’Kane’s (2008) work on developing participatory methods with young people. We decided that the methods used to capture their experiences should be fun, creative and flexible. Young people would decide how they would like to participate for example some wanted to draw whereas other felt more comfortable talking about their experiences. It was vital that the young people were presented with a variety of ways to engage with the research. If they were limited to just one approach for example, writing, this would have led to some voices being excluded. To ensure every story was heard the researcher had to be led by the young people (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2016). This adjustment in power can be unsettling for young people so to begin with the researcher did provide some prompts to scaffold their engagement with the research process (Armstrong, 2019). We discussed what they felt were important issues to explore with regard to their educational journeys, the young people suggested a number of key themes and we discussed how they wanted to explore these issues for example creating a poster. There were six activity sessions held in each of the three research settings. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes.

**Please insert Table Two: Overview of Activity Sessions**

During the sessions the researcher acted as a facilitator with the young people being afforded space and freedom to express themselves and direct the focus of the discussions (Lundy, 2007; Johnson and West, 2021).

***Stage three – individual interviews***

Following on from the activity sessions, the young people met with the researcher on an individual basis to try and capture each of their journeys through the education system. During these sessions, the researcher worked with the young people to fill out an educational life grid to capture their educational experiences. This method is based on life grids which are a visual tool for mapping important life events against a course of time (Wilson et al., 2007). The approach proved useful when discussing sensitive issues as the visual element engaged young people and they were helpful in creating a relaxed atmosphere which is supportive of pupil voice (Wilson et al., 2007). Throughout the interviews young people were asked to identify what they consider to be “critical moments” in their education, for example, when they were excluded from school. Young people were again asked how they would like to participate, whether they would like to fill in the grid themselves or if they would like the researcher to fill it in on their behalf. Throughout, the researcher needed to be flexible in their approach to ensure they were able to adapt to the needs of each individual young person (Lundy, 2007; Johnson and West, 2021). Throughout the process of working with the young people it was difficult to move away from reproducing models from the adult world to ensure the young people felt empowered to make decisions (Sellman, 2009). It is particularly important to consider the onus that is placed on the young person within voice research, as they have been subjected to a system which has worked to punish them whenever they attempt to challenge the status quo (Caslin, 2021). Here the researcher had a key role to play in ensuring the young person felt valued and to reaffirm to the young person that they are the expert, and their voice was central to understanding the needs of excluded young people (Ruddock & Flutter, 2004; Caslin, 2019: Ahmed Shafi, 2020; Scott-Barrett et al., 2019).

***Stage four - data analysis***

It was essential for young people to be empowered throughout all stages of the research and this included analysis of the data. Data analysis was an ongoing process. After the activity sessions the researcher met with the young people to discuss the work they had produced and try to identify what they considered to be the key themes. Follow up sessions also took place after the individual interviews to discuss their completed educational life grid. The researcher then continually checked with the young people to ensure that their voices were captured accurately, and that they had the opportunity to make any necessary changes. It was essential to ensure their stories were captured verbatim and for the young people to decide what they considered to be the most important messages to share. Although the researcher set out with well-meaning intentions it is important for the researcher to consider their role in potential silencing the young person’s voice. For example, when the research is written up for publication it is often in the hands of the researcher rather than the young people. This does lead to the concern that research merely seeks to ‘give voice’ with power remaining with the adult researcher (Lundy, 2007; Ahmed Shafi, 2020. Indeed, it tends to be the adult who has the most to gain in terms of their professional career. Whilst it could be argued that through dissemination of the research the young person’s voice is being heard, this is an important issue to consider as responsibility remains with the researcher to be clear in their accounts of the research process (Ahmed Shafi, 2020; O’Brien and Dadswell, 2020).

In addition, researchers must at the outset of their study acknowledge their own value positions (Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020; Liddiard et al., 2018). This becomes particularly significant when research is located within schools and classrooms as there are inherent power dynamics. One way to overcome these power relationships is to ensure young people are empowered. Listening is inextricably linked with empowerment, to ignore a person disempowers them. Taking notice of the young person’s views and enabling them to influence decision making is empowering. Listening is central to ethical practice (Nind et al., 2012; Lundy, 2007). There is also a need for researchers to be reflective in their approach and the understandings they attach to pupil voice. Some writers (Lundy, 2007; Honkanen et al., 2018; Komulainen, 2007; O’Brien and Dadswell, 2020) have emphasised the need to guard against tokenistic practice which fails to either analyse what is said or use the information to influence change. Researchers then need to be held accountable as they have a responsibility to the young people who took part in their work. From the outset the researcher made clear their intentions to hear the stories young people wanted to share, however they were reliant on adults who control the spaces young people occupy. This paper will reflect on how adults impacted on this study. Although the research was subject to rigorous ethical procedures it has been suggested that all research with young people when adult initiated, is unequal and there are calls for researchers to question typical ethical processes, such as gaining consent (Horgan, 2017). The paper will now turn to explore how the researcher navigated the ethical dilemmas encountered on their journey into the realm of pupil voice.

**Barriers to hearing the voices of excluded young people**

Pupil voice is a complex and multifaceted concept, and researchers are encouraged to acknowledge the inherent messiness that comes with this approach to research (Facca et al., 2020). Some of the key barriers encountered during the process of this study will now be critically explored starting with the role of gatekeepers.

***Role of gatekeepers***

Due to the age of the young people participating in the study, the researcher was required to obtain consent from the young person’s parent/carer. Previous studies which have attempted to engage parents of pupils who have been excluded from school have found this proved to be extremely difficult (Chamberlain and Hodgetts, 2018). There are several factors which may account for this such as parental disengagement from the education providers (Wilson, 2020), and low levels of adult literacy (Sime, 2008). This is reflective of what happened with this study. Although the young people had been keen to take part in the research, difficulties were encountered in obtaining written consent from their parents/carers. Due to data protection the researcher was reliant on the educational provision to send out initial information about the research. This could be considered one of the ways in which school structures can work to silence the student voice. As with many research studies based in educational settings, the researcher was reliant on managers and teachers initially sharing information with the young people. There was the potential danger that the adult may misinterpret the purpose of the study. To overcome such issues, the researcher attempted to work collaboratively with the professionals and parents to ensure they were aware of what was happening at every stage of the research process, so that they felt part of the study (Lundy, 2007; Johnson and West, 2021). It was also hoped that building a trusting relationship would alleviate any of the fears the adults had around the purpose of the study and how the information gained would be used. However once immersed in the field it soon became clear that the adults who surround the young people would have a significant impact on the research.

***Location of the study***

School-based studies are rooted in hidden pressures, and researchers will need to consider the ethics of their practice in this respect (O’Brien and Dadswell, 2020). Within such adult dominated environments, it is deemed extremely difficult for young people to opt out of research (Kirby, 2020). The young people may have felt obliged to take part in the research because they were informed by adults in a position of authority. To address this the researcher developed strategies for equalising the power relations between the adult researcher and the young people; they included the need for reflexivity, responsiveness, fun and allowing young people greater participation and control (Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson, 2020). Furthermore, ensuring the young people were aware of their right to withdraw was essential. The research adopted process consent with the young people being provided with on-going opportunities to assess what was being asked of them as well as opportunities to agree to continue or withdraw at any stage (O’Reilly and Dogra, 2017). Yet despite having such strategies in place it was simply not possible to remove all the inherent power imbalances that are present within such adult controlled spaces (Cook-Sather, 2006; Sellman, 2009).

Interestingly the freedom afforded to the researcher appeared to be determined by the type of provision and ethos of those in charge. It became clear throughout the data collection stages that the head teacher at the special school wished to remain in control. He insisted that the meetings with young people always took place in the room next door to his office and the door remained open. An example of the impact the headteacher had on the research was when discussing their favourite teacher, a couple of the young people mentioned their headteachers name, this led to an exchange between the pupils and headteacher. Knowing that their headteacher was listening will have undoubtedly had an impact on the responses given by this group of young people. The role such adults play in manipulating the pupil voices is widely recognised (Cook-Sather, 2006; Ahmed Shafi, 2020; Scott-Barrett, Cebula & Florian, 2019). Of further interest is the fact that this was the only provision to have a school council. This is clearly telling of how pupil voice has been interpreted as mere “surface compliance” (Taylor and Robinson, 2009) rather than truly embracing the notion of pupil participation. The adults continue to decide how voices are heard. Additionally, as research suggests, some teachers are wary of listening to the perspectives of their pupils (Sargeant, 2017; Mayes et al., 2020). One teacher even went as far as to suggest that there should be a return to the “good old days” where children would be “controlled”. This leads to the question as to whether schools are ready to truly hear the voices of young people

I would say overall it has got worse, I think the pressure of society is that children rule rather than adults rule. A child’s right to be in charge of their destiny is much higher and nobody has told the children their rights are to be educated, to be looked after not to do what they want to do. The child’s rights include to be controlled and somewhere along the line and I think it happened in the mid-eighties to nineties all of a sudden child’s rights came in and somebody never said hold it, it is not the rights of the child to have their own way it is the rights of the children to be looked after. (Special school teacher)

It is interesting to note that the teacher feels there was a shift in line with when legislation was first introduced, such as the UNCRC 1989. This suggests that although teachers do have an awareness of the rights of the child, for this teacher it was viewed as having a detrimental impact on young people’s educational experiences. It is also important to acknowledge the emphasis that is placed on young people being controlled, this could be reflective of the government agenda encouraging teachers to respond to this group of pupils in particular ways for example removing them from the classroom (Caslin, 2021; Joseph, 2020). The emphasis placed on the teachers role to ‘look after’ young people is also interesting as it reinforcing the idea that they (adults) know best and have a vital role to play in containing and controlling the lives of young people. For this teacher, voice was seen as a threat as it has the potential to undermine their authority in the classroom (Bragg, 2007; Sellman, 2009; Whitty and Wisby, 2007).

The teacher’s perception was not reflective of the young person’s experience. Young people felt they had no control over their educational journeys, and they were not being listened to by the adults who surround them. Yet there is a plethora of research which highlights that this group of young people can clearly articulate factors which would impact on their educational experiences (Sellman, 2009; Sheffield & Morgan, 2017; Caslin, 2019). Indeed, the young people who participated in the study were clear in their desire to be heard

**It is important because if we want a say they should listen to what we want instead of them getting their own way. So, they should listen to like what we have been doing, what we want to change about the school so they can make it better for us (Billy)**

***Whose voice?***

This paper seeks to highlight the complex nature of pupil voice research. Due to inherent power dynamics within the classroom certain groups of young people continue to be ignored and thus remain on the periphery of decision-making processes in education (Dimitirellou & Male, 2020). Amongst these are young people who have been excluded from school (Caslin, 2021). The researcher sought not only to listen but to really hear the stories this group of young people wanted to share however as noted throughout the paper the researcher was reliant on adults to access the pupil’s voice.

As mentioned earlier the freedom that was afforded to the researcher was dependent on the ethos of those in charge of the educational setting. The researcher encountered particular challenges when working in the special school. Here the headteacher wanted to retain control over all the research processes starting with who would be allowed to participate. Within this setting it was felt particularly important to ensure young people were aware of their right to withdraw was essential. Groundwater-Smith (2007) advocates young people being aware of their “right to say no”. Whilst conducting the activity sessions with young people in the special school, one young person decided they would no longer like to participate in the study. This was significant as it meant other young people were conscious that they could drop out of the study at any time without any repercussions.

With adults selecting whose voices should be heard there is a concern that the research will only focus on those who are most able to articulate their views. This has the effect that young people who are the most disadvantaged within the classroom are regularly excluded from pupil voice research (Dimitirellou & Male, 2020). During the activity sessions the young people discussed their experiences of pupil voice suggesting that they felt they would be perceived as less worthy of having their voice heard.

**They will pick the little geek of the class or something, some nerd they wouldn’t pick someone like one of them or me who have been kicked out. (Adam)**

**You don’t get no say in anything in school (Helen)**

Even when young people were provided with an opportunity to discuss their experiences, they felt they were not really listened to;

**All we had to do was say if we wanted trips or not…we never went like we just said we wanted to go we never went.** **Basically, we would just say something and we would get ignored. (Adam)**

Here the researcher needs to acknowledge the role they play in mirroring school structures which have worked to silence the pupil voice (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2006). The young people clearly articulated the barriers they experienced when seeking to have their voice heard. Throughout the project they had important messages to share but these were not being heard by the adults who surround them. Instead, once they had shared their stories they went back to the classroom where they would be punished for challenging the status quo (Adams, 2008: Holt, 2016; Armstrong, 2018). Whilst there may be personal benefits to the young people in terms of being listened to, it is important to acknowledge that the young persons educational experiences did not change as a result of working with the researcher. They highlighted all the ways in which they felt they had been failed by the education system but did not experience direct benefits. Although difficult to acknowledge, it was vital that the researcher recognised the role they played in reinforcing some of the structures that they were actively seeking to challenge. Within the literature it has been highlighted that researchers may need to make compromises to access young people’s voices (Mearns, Coyle & de Graaff, 2014). These compromises will impact on the research that is produced and therefore it is vital that researchers reflect on their role in shaping research.

***Role of the researcher***

Young people can often feel disappointment and disillusionment when they see no change in their educational experiences after sharing their views (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2019). This leads to questions being raised about the ethics of seeking the views of young people when they themselves do not directly see change. Yet it is also important to acknowledge the potential benefits for young people in taking part in research. As highlighted earlier there are benefits resulting from the outcomes of the research and there are also benefits in the personal development of young researchers and potential changes for others (Kellett, 2010; Ahmed Shafi, 2020). This is further echoed by Moules and O’Brien (2016) who argue that young researchers can feel a sense of achievement from being valued during the process, as well as gaining an in-depth understanding of research. It became apparent throughout the duration of the study this group of young people did not have many opportunities to have their voice heard. There is value in being heard, being able to share your story with someone who was willing to listen (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2006). Although, as noted in the previous section the young people may not have felt any direct benefit in terms of their own education, it was vital that the researcher recognised the significant contribution young people made to the research. The researcher worked with the provisions to ensure young people were recognised for the commitment they had shown throughout the research process. Within the context of education, these young people have a reputation for being difficult and hard to engage yet this did not reflect the researcher’s experiences.

That is not to suggest that the researcher did not encounter any challenges when working with the young people. The researcher set out to ensure young people’s voices were being heard and, despite working closely with the young people to design the research methods, it become clear that there would need to be flexibility in the approaches adopted. Whilst filling in the educational life grid with Christine she became frustrated when recalling her educational history. She felt the grid was not adequate to capture an accurate picture of her journey. During our discussion she became upset

**I don’t want to do this I want this worksheet ripped up right now because I have been to loads of schools, you haven’t done it right, you haven’t put more things for year seven you have only put one column (Christine)**

Christine’s response may have been due to the trauma of recalling her chaotic educational journey. To address her concerns the research stopped immediately and we redesigned the grid together. Even when using methods designed by young people, they will not necessarily be appropriate for all young people. This again highlights the need to be flexible, creative and most importantly for the researcher to be led by the young person (Mearns et al., 2014; Honkanen et al., 2018).

**Conclusion**

Young people who have been removed from the classroom do have a desire to be heard yet they remain constrained by overriding adult concerns. In many ways the researcher was rather naïve in terms of what could be achieved within a study of this nature. When setting off on this journey into the realm of pupil voice the researcher held rather “cosy” (Roche, 1999) notions of the term. Adults are legally required to seek the perspectives of young people, yet it is adults not pupils who determine how these voices will be heard (Lundy, 2007; O’Brien and Dadswell, 2020). Evidently this can work to manipulate or even silence the pupil voice. We need to move away from a medical model approach where the ‘problem’ is seen to be located within the pupil and instead recognise the wider social structures that surround them such as the education system (Caslin, 2021; Goodley, 2017; Joseph, 2020). However, this would require adults to critically reflect on the role they play in contributing to young people’s voices being silenced. Through working with young people, the researcher hoped to move beyond passively listening to their stories to instead ensure they are being heard, however for the young people involved very little changed. They went back to a system which continued to fail them. Whilst we may be getting better at listening, young people are increasingly being provided with opportunities to share their stories, the extent to which we are really willing to hear the important messages young people have to share is in doubt. This can be particularly difficult when the messages that are being shared challenge the status quo (Adams, 2008; Holt, 2016; Armstrong, 2018).

As suggested by Facca, Gladstone and Teachman (2020) researchers need to reflect on the ‘messiness’ that comes with voice research, particularly regarding the ethical dilemmas encountered. To achieve this the researcher should be open and honest in their account of the research processes. Researchers can provide young people with an opportunity to share their stories, but they need to reflect on the role of adults in shaping research production. For example, within this study the researcher was reliant on the head teacher at the special school who made it clear they wished to remain in control. This undoubtedly impacted the young people and perhaps the researcher should have challenged the head teacher. It was through the process of conducting the study that important lessons were learnt, and this will help to shape future research projects. This paper offers a reflection of the challenges written from the perspective of the researcher; the voices of young people should also be included in these discussions. Throughout the paper the challenges of conducting voice research within educational setting has been highlighted yet, despite these challenges, the author agrees with Cook-Sather (2006) who reinforces the importance of researchers continuing to strive for change. It is essential that researchers move beyond simply ‘giving voice’, researchers have a responsibility to ensure that the important messages this group of young people share are heard and, in doing so, they need to acknowledge all the ways in which young people continue to be silenced.

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