Self-advocacy and socially just pedagogy

SLATER, Jenny <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6739-7784>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

https://shura.shu.ac.uk/7067/

Citation:

Self-advocacy and socially just pedagogy Jenny Slater Manchester Metropolitan University E-mail: jbslater3@gmail.com

Keywords:

self-advocacy, pedagogy, education, Deleuze and Guattari

Abstract

Discussions of 'special educational needs' (SEN), 'children with SEN' and 'inclusion' continue to portray disabled learners as problematic 'others' to be tolerated and managed (Allan 2004). The neo-liberal prioritisation of entrepreneurship and autonomy create further problems for disabled learners attempting to negotiate an increasingly market-driven education system. This paper comes about as a result of eight-weeks spent as a volunteer in an organisation offering self-advocacy based projects to young people with the label of 'learning difficulties', and considers such projects alongside Deleuzoguatarrian Disability Studies discussions of socially just pedagogy. By drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome, and considering desire as productive, it is argued that such projects have the potential to offer an alternative, more engaged and socially-just education to the one currently offered in schools.

Introduction

Discussions of 'special educational needs' (SEN), 'children with SEN' and 'inclusion' continue to portray disabled learners as problematic 'others' to be tolerated and managed (Allan, 2004). Whereas researchers have grappled with race, gender, sexuality and class in relation to radical educational discourses, disability has often been excluded from debate (Goodley & Roets, 2008). This article arises from eight weeks spent with Voice (pseudonym), a government-funded social enterprise offering self-advocacy based projects to 13-25 year-olds with the label of 'learning difficulty'[1] in northern England. Similar schemes have been criticised for diluting self-advocacy movements (Aspis, 1997, 2002). Time spent in the organisation, however, led me to consider the project more broadly alongside poststructuralist discussions of pedagogy. This paper will argue that making binary distinctions of disabled/non-disabled can unhelpfully cast the two groups in opposition to one-another, leaving underlying disabling notions unaddressed (Goodley, 2009; Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008). In order to avoid perpetuating this trend I will draw on Deleuzoguattarian disability studies frameworks to consider—rather than disabled vs. non-disabled, student vs. teacher dichotomies—dis/abled learners and educators 'becoming-in-the-world-together' (Shildrick, 2009). In doing this, I will discuss the extent to which those involved are allied in negotiating and breaking down disabling barriers.

Background to Voice

Voice is a social enterprise which runs self-advocacy based projects for people with learning difficulties (PWLD) across the UK. I spent eight weeks as a volunteer in a branch offering three projects to 13-25 year olds:

1. *Moving On* offers 'life skills' courses designed by young people and delivered in the community to 16-25 year olds. These include 'travel', 'work' and 'confidence skills'.
2. *Voices of Young People* (VOYP) takes place in ('segregated' and 'mainstream') schools and colleges. Voice staff initially explain VOYP to students selected by the school, who then choose whether to take part. The aim is to help young PWLD increase their self-confidence and make decisions about their lives. Group sessions take place weekly in school hours. The young people select the focus from issues such as 'teamwork', 'social skills' and 'confidence building'.
3. *Youth Parliament* is a chance for young people to present the concerns of their peers to decision makers. Youth MPs are elected in their constituencies (schools, colleges, youth clubs) where they then run campaigns focusing on a particular issue, such as transport. A parliament is held monthly where MPs deliver their constituents' views to representatives of relevant companies with the aim of influencing policy.

As is further articulated in the Methodology section, my research aims evolved during my time with Voice; entering alert to and with the intention of investigating possible tokenism within government-funded self-advocacy based projects, focus shifted to explore pedagogical relationships between young people and staff members. This resulted in a series of semi-structured interviews with young people and staff. More information will be given on the study later in the paper, but first I turn my attention to discussions of UK self-advocacy and socially just pedagogy.

Learning Together

First emerging as a grassroots movement, self-advocacy has since broadened to include, not just groups controlled by PWLD, but groups established within service-based settings (Sutcliffe & Simmons, 1993). Some people worry that this has resulted in self-advocacy's dilution to a tokenistic tool for service providers (Aspis, 1997, 2002; Buchanan & Walmsley, 2006). This worry is not unfounded. Llewellyn and Northway (2008) highlight that PWLD may be 'empowered' only to make service-based micro-level changes, with non-disabled people still ultimately in control. The continued government drive for service-user consultation, apparent in UK documents such as *Valuing People Now*2 (Department of Health, 2007), means the concern remains. It would be easy to make the assumption that Voice is one such project perpetuating this trend. Research telling the stories of self-advocates, however, has drawn more positive conclusions: Goodley (2000) and Gilmartin and Slevin (2010) highlight how self-advocates felt more confident to 'speak-up' after being part of self-advocacy groups. Both studies emphasise the importance of peer-support networks established through groups, which enabled members to share experiences, offer advice to one-another, and form friendships. The significance of sharing knowledge is depicted strongly in Marie's story, a self-advocate using the support of peers to avoid the pressure of sterilisation (Roets, Goodley, Van Hove, & Taylor, 2007). This story disputes criticisms that self-advocacy only leads to micro-level service-based change.

A belief in the importance of social learning and peer support is equally apparent in literature surrounding transformative education, with advocates maintaining that formal education systems falsely separate learning from life, when learning is a natural process of sharing experience which predates institutionalisation (Illich, 1971). Informal and community educators offer a similar analysis, maintaining the importance of education outside the classroom (Davies, 2005). Feminist scholars, such as bell hooks (1994), advocate a caring dimension, considering parenting within the pedagogical remit. hooks argues both teacher and pupil must be engaged to make education a potentially transformative practice. Gabel (2002) highlights that at the core of such discussions is the belief that central to pedagogy are the social relations of human beings. Therefore, education becomes a phenomenon much wider than just the methods taking place within formal institutions, and self-advocacy groups become potential pedagogical sites, where self-advocates and staff alike can learn from one-another.

Despite this, the learning relationships between self-advocates and their non-disabled supporters have seldom been explored in disability literature (Goodley, 1998, being a notable exception). Rather, non-disabled people (advisors/staff) have often been portrayed as barriers to change rather than potential allies to self-advocates. Ryan and Runswick-Cole (2008, 201) note similarly demonising representations of parents hindering the 'development' of their disabled children. They call for the consideration to be made that "parents may not be pathologizing their children but trying to operate within a disabling set of practices". It is also important, therefore, to consider the barriers faced by others when attempting to 'side with' disabled people. Tregaskis (2004) appeals for researchers to consider the interface between disabled and non-disabled people as complex and influenced by historic and cultural messages and experiences. To assume that Voice staff are merely cogs within a techno-rational system of education, not only discredits the staff involved, but continues the dangerous trend of portraying PWLD as passive and unable to demonstrate resilience.

Beyond Inclusion

I therefore follow Gabel when she calls for a:

"relational understanding of pedagogy as a form of caring for or transforming others and oneself, as a way of living together in the community. In this sense, pedagogy is a product of the social discourse between diverse individuals rather than a manuscript of discourse about discourse."

(Gabel, 2002, 179)

Gabel's dynamic pedagogy, focusing on social relations, removes the end-product prioritisation, allowing for the unpredictability of learning. Freire's (1970), *A Pedagogy of The Oppressed,* steers clear of a goal-driven curriculum, instead advocating that, given the right education, everyone has the ability to critically engage with the world around them. However, alongside others acclaimed for offering socially-just alternatives to traditional structures of education (such as Giroux, 2003), Freire fails to mention how such pedagogy relates to disabled learners (Gabel, 2002; Goodley, 2007; Goodley & Roets, 2008). As Gabel (2002) highlights, Freire's emphasis on literacy could be particularly problematic for PWLD.

A recurring assertion in radical educational literature is that schools exist to create a marketable workforce of producers and consumers to slot into capitalist society (Mayo, 2003). Capitalism separates acquisition and production; in other words, people desire the

acquisition of products which they are 'lacking'. To be productive, an end *product* is required. This can be seen in outcome-based education systems: the exam result is the product individual students are judged upon. Assessment, argues Erevelles (2005), is an attempt to rate children in terms of their future productivity — their usefulness within capitalist systems. The labelling of disabled children is one such attempt to create order in terms of conformity to (ableist) economic structures; disabled children are considered unsuitable workers so written out of the 'mainstream' sorting process under the guise of 'special education' (Baker, 2002). Conversely, Erevelles (2000, 2005) highlights that a degree of unemployment is necessary to keep economies efficient. Rather than making this apparent, however, unemployed people are assumed deficient in the attributes needed for work. The educational exclusion of disabled people, traditionally construed as unproductive, can therefore be legitimised under the pretext of 'maintaining standards' (Goodley, 2007).

Deleuze and Guattari (1972) refuse the concept of the complete sovereign self, and therefore also the possibility of 'lack'. Desire, they argue, is a machine, and that which is desired another machine that connects to it. Desiring machines can be both organic and inorganic, they are simply "the site of activation of a certain relation" (Buchanan, 1997, 83). The body is a desiring machine. As machines are both desiring and desired there can be no split between acquisition and production; desire is a force of production, and therefore, is itself productive (Buchanan, 1997; Gibson, 2006). Deleuze and Guattari challenge us to think differently, viewing the world not as atomised units, but non-hierarchical (rhizomic) networks of productive desire, a flowing of energies and intensities between interconnected, unstable beings:

"Desire is not an element of any singular subject; it is not pregiven; it is neither possessed nor controlled; and nor does it flow directly from one individual to another."

(Shildrick, 2004)

The unpredictability of desire means outcomes cannot be anticipated. Therefore, to translate this to pedagogy results, not in systems based upon results-driven curricula, but networks thriving upon "expression[s] of power, energy and joy" (Goodley, 2007, 16) in which disabled students are as equally productive as their non-disabled peers.

Such desire relies on accepting interconnectivity, a notion opposed to the neoliberal drive for independence that feeds the Western deficit construct of disability (Davis, 2002; Goodley, 2007). Ware (2005) argues that while independence remains the goal, disabled people will not be accepted as they serve as a reminder of the potential for dependence. The underlying naturalised assumption that to be independent is 'good' and dependent is 'bad' (an example of what Deal (2007) terms 'aversive disablism') cannot be combated through law or legislation. Questioning ingrained societal ideals, therefore, becomes necessary. Peters, Klein and Shadwick (1998) argue that engaging in critical pedagogy means encouraging students to think critically and draw on personal experience to increase awareness of themselves, others, and their connections with the world. By creating space for such discussion, it is envisaged that alternative pictures of the future become possible — pedagogical sites become dynamic places of transformation with the potential to challenge disabling implicit beliefs.

Sutcliffe and Simons (1993, 4) relate this pedagogical belief to self-advocacy when they argue that "self-advocacy is about a process of self-development: people becoming confident and assertive enough to put forward their views about their lives". This works by "people forming groups to discuss things and to try and change things collectively", a stance

supported by a group of self-advocates who, when asked how they would define self-advocacy, responded with definitions such as "a voice for everyone", "being listened to" and "helping those who need more help" (Sutcliffe & Simmons, 1993, 2) . A 'rhizomatic' approach to education calls for just that: pedagogical sites that are not places of recitation and stratification, but safe spaces to grapple with ideas and experiences, where the focus is moved from the individual subject to networks of interdependency. Good/bad, right/wrong binaries are deemed fallacious; learning is appreciated as a process of meaning-making, dependent on social, historical and cultural lived experience; and knowledge is recognised as constructed and dynamic, clashes and contradictions within it as inevitable (Allan, 2004). Crucially, the emphasis of education shifts from celebrating achievement to valuing difference.

Aspis (2002) worries, despite rhetoric crossover with radical educational discourses, many service-based self-advocacy groups are run on a hierarchical basis with non-disabled staff who are ultimately in control. In a paper discussing postmodern schooling, Allan (2004) argues that, within schools, teacher training is the place to break down traditional hierarchies. This thought is echoed by Ware (2005, 108) when she maintains that, without access to alternative discourses of education and disability, teachers "continue to deny paternalism, disbelieve that the system reinforces stereotypes of dependence and inferiority, dismiss the logic of the social construction of disability and dispute their own complicity in pathologizing disability". When given access to such discussion, however, teachers in Ware's study became engaged in debate of the self/other, aware of their potential for perpetuation/transformation of stereotypes and questioned their previous training. With such engagement teachers become potential allies to disabled people within (and beyond) the classroom. Furthermore, a poststructuralist approach challenges the teacher/student distinction to allow for each learning from one-another, becoming-learners and becoming-educators. Notwithstanding this, Gallagher (2005) highlights how, even if engaged in challenging discourses, rigid institutional structures mean teachers are required to work within disabling environments and take a technical-rational approach to education, which furthers the need to avoid applying blanket blame to one group over another in research.

With the above in mind I will now go on to discuss my time with Voice. Voice staff are working with young people both inside and outside of schools, yet are aiming to offer something different to traditional schooling. Therefore, my focus is on the extent those involved are experimenting with more socially just pedagogies.

A Reflexive Methodology

Barnes (2002) argues that disability research should always seek to disrupt oppressive forces which perpetuate disability. It follows, therefore, that I entered research considering myself an engaged, interpretive researcher, "firmly on the side of disabled people" (Goodley & Moore, 2000, 862), conscious of and aiming to be responsive to power imbalances. As Voice aligns itself with self-advocacy, my first theoretical port of call was self-advocacy literature. Consequently, I entered research concerned about tokenism within service-based establishments (which, I thought, would become the focus of my research), as is reflected in an extract from my fieldwork diary after my first day with the project at a Youth Parliament:

"The young people (youth MPs) stand in a line in front of an audience made up of various transport 'professionals'. Each MP grips a cue card with a question on for them to address to the professionals: "why can't my friend that uses a wheelchair sit next to me on the bus?", "why aren't there any bins in the train station?" Meanwhile, Voice staff buzz around in the

background, trying to look inconspicuous but ready to be on hand if an MP freezes. A few do, and when it happens the staff member whispers the question in their ear, for them to repeat, or reads the question aloud for them. The young people appear to be having a good time, but how much of it is *really* in their control? How many of the questions are their own? Will any real change come of this? And if so, whose agenda will it be satisfying? Is it just another example of box-ticking consultation?"

(Fieldwork Diary, Day 1, Youth Parliament)

As this quote illustrates, I was sceptical towards the project. The room felt chaotic when I entered. I knew nobody and felt unsure of my role. Staff and young people were busy, so they had little time to spend with me. As a result, the backdrop to my observations was my reading around self-advocacy and Voice's own literature. I was falling into the trap of placing disabled and non-disabled people in binary opposition to one-another (Tregaskis, 2004), viewing staff as distortions to the 'real' voices of the young people and ignoring their potential as allies. I was seeking the achievable goals I was used to striving for within my own education, alongside a rhetoric of empowerment and revolution reiterated to me in my socialist upbringing and apparent in the writings of Freire (1970) and Illich (1971). Some of these assumptions were not completely unfounded: of the three projects that were run by Voice, Youth Parliament takes the most rights-based stance. Furthermore, to ignore recent studies highlighting tokenism within strains of self-advocacy would be irresponsible. It was my first encounters with Deleuze and Guattari, however, that made me rethink how my ingrained concepts of individual autonomy and empowerment were affecting the research.

Davis (2002, 30) warns that taking a purely rights-based approach to disability activism can result in attempting to make "all identities equal under a model of the rights of the dominant, often white, male, "normal" subject". A thought echoed by Shildrick, when she suggests:

"In place of the demand for rights, choice, and self-determination that presently shape the dominant discourse of disability activism, a more open and productive model that celebrates the qualities of those already living at the margins might be proposed."

(Shildrick 2004)

Under this model, she argues:

"The disabled woman who needs an assistant or carer to help her prepare for a sexual encounter… is not different in kind from other women, but only engaged more overtly in just those networks that Deleuze and Guattari might characterise as desiring production."

(Shildrick 2004)

Taking this Deleuzoguattarian stance required me to reconsider the personal pronoun, thinking beyond notions of the individual so often apparent in rhetoric surrounding empowerment (has *she* devised that question *herself*?), to instead consider the young people as engaged in networks of productive desire: those requiring the most assistance, the most engaged ("desire is not an element of any singular subject", Shildrick 2004). Deleuzoguattarian thinking is not necessarily about empowerment, but "challenging and supporting (rhizomatically)… productive desire" (Goodley, 2007, 16). As my relationships with those involved grew, I saw that staff took their member-led ethos seriously, considering their role to support ("…what they want to do, how they want to do it. We just help them do that", interview with Tina, staff). The material changes I was looking for were only

applicable if on the agendas of young people. Staff were doing what I had failed to do at the beginning of my time with Voice, considering the young people's desires as productive and valuing this over any tangible outcomes of Youth Parliament.

My new Delezeuzoguattarian toolbox, therefore, not only gave me a theoretical framework to base my data analysis upon, but also influenced my methodology; uncovering my own ableist prioritisation of independence that set staff and young people in opposition to one-another. Once alert to this, I was interested in listening to the stories and exploring the relationships between young people and staff involved with Voice. I approached the young people in the hope that they would help me develop a suitable method for data collection. As I had spent a considerable amount of time acting as a volunteer with a particular VOYP group (eight 15/16-year olds at a comprehensive school), this group was my first port of call. Of these, four opted to talk to me. We discussed my research; I asked whether they would prefer to be interviewed alone, with a friend, or take part in focus groups. We decided between us that I would record individual semi-structured interviews, a process these four took part in, as did three youth MPs. As this method worked well with the young people, I took a similar approach with the staff two weeks later. All staff agreed to be interviewed (four front line and the project leader). Each participant was interviewed once in interviews lasting between 10 and 40 minutes. At a Youth Parliament day post-interviews, young people, staff and other professionals were interviewed about their involvement with Voice for a film being made by the national Voice team. I had the opportunity to record these interviews and the answers given supported the data I had collected.

As can be seen above, I also found a fieldwork diary a useful tool for recording my own reflections after each day with Voice. Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson (1996) argue that despite a postmodern, polyvocal turn in ethnographic research (influenced in part by feminist frameworks encouraging reflexivity), the rising popularity of rigid computer-based analysis programmes resides within a modernist framework. Noting this, I maintain that although the bulk of what could be conceptualised as 'formal analysis' took place after the interviews, analysis was for me taking place (organically) throughout the project (Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1999). I feel this is illustrated in my fieldwork diary. At the end of the fieldwork, the methods employed led me to an inductive thematic analysis. Following Miles and Huberman (1999), I transcribed interview data and allowed themes to emerge from it (although, emerging themes were undoubtedly a result of my own interpretation). I will now go on to explore the key themes.

Key Findings

Disbanding hierarchies: becoming together

In previous studies, self-advocates emphasised the importance of peer support (Gilmartin & Slevin, 2010; Goodley, 2000). This was reflected in interviews with young people. When asked why she liked being a MP, Beth responded:

"I've made loads of new friends and it's made me feel really, really confident about myself and speaking in front of other people."

(Beth, MP)

Beth explained how she and her fellow MPs support one-another, helping new MPs by giving advice, such as "try to keep yourself calm and just enjoy yourself". The VOYP projects, taking place in schools, had a similar focus on peer support and group discussion. Rob and Iain positively noted how this differed from the mandatory curricula-based classes they were used to attending:

"[Voice] is different because you get to speak up whether you like everyone, anyone's opinion or you don't like anyone's opinion or you don't agree with anyone's opinion."

(Rob, VOYP project)

"I mean we don't speak in a group in English and that lot and I'm normally uncomfortable in a group but I feel safe here because I know everyone."

(Iain, VOYP project)

Iain's casting of VOYP as a safe space, and consequentially other parts of school as unsafe, highlights the criticality of developing alternative pedagogies which allow for all involved to feel comfortable. Staff saw developing group relationships as key to this. This did not mean that everyone always got along; allegiances between young people were hard to keep up with and arguments occurred regularly. At the end of a VOYP session, staff would ask the young people what they would like to do the following week, and plan from this a rough agenda. But the vivacity of group dynamics meant these rarely ran to schedule. Instead, sessions would run on an ad-hoc basis: debating the correct execution of a game taking place in the first few minutes, or heatedly discussing a falling out that had occurred earlier in the day. Shildrick (2004) notes that productive desire is constantly "frustrating the anticipated outcome of performativity". And by allowing sessions to evolve organically, staff were encouraging the collective desire to flow. Similarly, Goodley (2007, 20) writes that, as becoming learners and educators, "our interests are not in formulating clear aims — stratifying the desert — but in openly embracing the becomings of relationships". It was only by 'going with' the desires of young people, allowing clashes to occur, that environments could emerge in which the young people felt safe to express themselves.

Developing lateral relationships between themselves and the young people was important to staff. When to describe their professional role with young people, the word 'facilitator' was used on several occasions, but answers also included 'friend' and 'empowerer' (the use of the term 'empowerer' is discussed later in the paper). All staff avoided the term 'teacher' (several positively dismissing it), although they acknowledged that working in schools sometimes required them to adopt a more 'teacher-like' position. Staff were also aware and willing to challenge differing views on what their relationship with young people should constitute:

"…I've been to induction days and things and people say, "In these projects you shouldn't become 'friends'". I just think that's ridiculous — you don't want to be seen as a teacher or anything like that so, to me, being somebody's friend is the best way to do this work."

(Caroline, staff)

This emphasis on care and well-being is akin to that of engaged pedagogy embraced by bell hooks (1994, 15). She writes of educators viewing learners holistically "with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge". Ruth, a member of staff, echoed this:

"…unless the young people feel like you respect them, you can have a laugh together, you get them as people, then they're not going to give you much back. Especially in school. If we're expecting them to show us confidence and assertiveness … sometimes we talk about things about yourselves — like, what makes you feel happy/sad. That's quite personal. If we're going to expect that from these young people you need to have a good working relationship."

(Ruth, staff)

hooks (1994) maintains that to embrace a progressive pedagogy, educators must ensure their own well-being. Caroline, a member of staff, concurs:

"… when we're in the car we always crank up the radio and Black Eyed Peas is on and we sing '*I Got A Feeling*'! I just think they wouldn't be sat here singing and laughing if they saw me as a teacher… and I sit there singing along with them as well… if it's not fun for you it's not going to be fun for them."

(Caroline, staff)

From early on it was clear that those involved relished each other's company; staff strived to do their best for young people and vice-versa ("Ruth is lovely, that's the lady who's leading — she's helped us through everything."- Steph, MP). Furthermore, they felt unable to do this without attempting to address traditional hierarchies, appreciating the becomings of relationships.

Imagining otherwise and making change

Several 'tangible' changes have come about as a result of the Youth Parliament: young people delivering training on 'disability issues' to the police, for example. Although undoubtedly less achievable without the input of young people, these changes have occurred largely due to the work of staff following up parliament days. Creating tangible change, however, is not the only requirement of those attempting to work within with critical pedagogy. Deever (cited in Peters, et al., 1998, 102) writes that to engage with critical pedagogy is to work "towards a critical understanding of the world and one's personal relationship to that world". Therefore, although making space for change is one aim of an educator, encouraging the development of students' questioning skills and their confidence to implement these skills must precede this. This sentiment is echoed by Caroline:

"It's hard to change things out there and if you've not got that personal development how can you change anything? That's the route of it, yourself."

(Caroline, staff)

Young people and those who knew them spoke of their increased confidence after being part of Voice:

"When I first came I was frightened. The first time I couldn't get up and talk. Since then I'm aware what you're supposed to do — it's easy when you get into it."

(Steph, MP)

"I'm more confident than I was before. Being a MP's just been amazing for me and got me more confidence."

(Sheena, MP)

"Natalie, the young person that I work with, has thoroughly blossomed throughout this programme. She's been brilliant. She's actually found her own voice. Whereas she was quite shy and inhibited, now she's brilliant — she'll question everything that she does in school which is obviously really brilliant."

(Deputy Head teacher involved in Youth Parliament)

In a paper looking at the virtual world game *Second Life* through a Deleuzian lens, Hickey-Moody and Wood (2008, 13) use the phrase "imagining otherwise" to describe how a Deleuzian perspective opens up the potential for the unknown. They adopt Deleuze's use of 'sad' and 'joy', defining sad as passions which reduce and joy as passions which increase the connective power of acting. Following this, a pedagogy allowing us to 'imagine otherwise' is one which embraces 'joy' by encouraging performative desire. When reflecting on their previous jobs, it seemed staff had begun to 'imagine otherwise'. Patrick, the project leader, reflected on his former role within social care, questioning what he then thought was a user-led approach. Rosie made similar comments about how she would act differently if she returned to her old teaching job:

"I'd give young people a lot more choice, try make everything more fun and make learning more enjoyable, rather than just sit down and you have to be quiet."

(Rosie, staff)

Staff also spoke of how working in Voice had challenged their own beliefs about PWLD. Patrick, the project leader, told me on numerous occasions that the young people "continued to amaze" him and that he would not have had the opportunity to experience this without handing over control (facilitating joy).

De/reterritorialization: negotiations and frustrations

Allan (2006), drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1972, 1987), describes how after a process of deterritorialization (deconstructing one's own disabling assumptions to uncover them as part of a problem) there is a danger of reterritorialization (recombining the deterritorialized elements to form a new assemblage of the old). Allan uses the example of educational policy to clarify her point: 'inclusion' is arguably a result of the realisation that to separate children due to impairment is immoral. Policy surrounding inclusion, however, has resulted in the reinvention of hierarchies which continue to other disabled children. Therefore, although we have 'uncovered' the disabling act of excluding pupils, by addressing it we have continued to exclude, albeit in a more 'socially acceptable' way (see also Titchosky's, 2010, work on 'excludable types'). This concept became apparent in some discussions with staff: although working in Voice had challenged some preconceptions about disability, they sometimes found it difficult to take this beyond the workplace. When asked if she would take anything back from Voice to her old job, Tina responded:

"It was a severe school, for people with severe learning disabilities… I don't think I'd be able to take anything back. Not that I wouldn't want to … I think it'd be nice to do the things that I do with [Moving On] with those people, but it's just whether you could control them out and about."

(Tina, staff)

Although Tina was adamant that young people she is now involved with should be able to make their own choices, she struggled to extend this to all with the label of 'learning difficulty', instead othering those she perceived as the most 'severely affected'. Individual notions of disability crept into conversations with other staff. One worker positioned herself as an expert in learning difficulty ("I had to pick learning disability as my field", Ruth, staff) and cited the 'problem' of young people's impairments ("…due to the ability of the young people it was very hard for them to specify what they wanted to do"). She also chose to describe herself as an 'empowerer', a phrase Goodley is cautious of:

"When professionals seek to 'empower' people with learning difficulties, there is a danger of reinforcing the victim status of people with learning difficulties"

(Goodley, 2005, 334)

A discourse of 'empowerment', however, was overridden by a stronger one of interdependency. Gabel (2002) worries that critical pedagogy's focus on literacy, prioritisation of 'conventional speech' and assumption of critical engagement, excludes some disabled learners. The name of the project, Voice, could be criticised for the ableist prioritisation of 'voice' which resides from the throat. Staff, however, were aware, frustrated by, and willing to challenge the incongruity of the name:

"Because it's called [Voice], and some of the students can't speak [teachers are] like, "oh yeah, come on then, go and speak up" and they say it in a bit of a sarcastic tone."

(Rosie, staff)

Rosie went on to tell me how using one's 'voice' did not always mean speaking aloud. This could be seen in the networks of independency visible at Youth Parliament days. One Youth MP, Toby, did not 'talk' but communicated through signs and gestures, a lot of which were interpreted through his friend, Mike. Nevertheless, at an organising meeting Toby made it known that he wished to stand at the front and read a question. After some deliberation between the MPs (some pointing out that Toby could not 'speak' the question aloud) it was decided Toby's request would be granted. To do this he would stand next to Mike whilst Mike spoke the question aloud. Mike also had his own question to read, and, despite Mike doing the 'speaking', everyone thought of Toby's question as Toby's question; he was the one doing the 'reading'. Together, the youth MPs and staff member (Rosie) reconceptualised and expanded the notion of 'voice'.

Structural barriers also frustrated staff when attempting to allow young people to lead projects:

"You could say to young people "what would make you feel confident?" and someone might say "jumping off a diving board ". As much as I'd love to go do that with them and make them feel really proud, I wouldn't be able to because it's got to be in school."

(Ruth, staff)

Staff felt constrained by time-consuming evaluative paper-work demanded by funders. As well as highlighting difficulty in quantifying personal characteristics such as 'confidence', they also questioned their role in this process:

"It's sort of on my opinion — in *my* opinion have I seen any improvement in confidence… I think, it's not really up to me."

(Caroline, staff)

"… I can type in "Sheena had a breakthrough today, she communicated with another member which she's never done before". I can write that down, but unless somebody's actually going to read every report for every session you're not going to see that change. And just by typing in she was a 'one' at the beginning and a 'five' now — which is what it comes down to… at the start you put them as a number and at the end you put them as a number — doesn't really mean anything."

(Tina, staff)

A major concern was the current funding coming to an end. The project leader was in the process of applying for alternative grants but staff felt forced to take on extra projects outside the ethos of Voice (such as befriending schemes). Although worrying about their own job security, staff demonstrated their commitment to the young people, expressing anxiety over their disappointment if the schemes had to end.

Discussion

My time with Voice demonstrated the importance of not setting groups of social actors in binary opposition to one-another. A more productive approach allows us to consider the relationships and mundane interactions of all involved. In my case, this meant uncovering my own ingrained ableist prioritisation of the rights-bearing individual. It was only when I began taking a relational approach to research that I could see the real benefits of Voice. Staff were grappling with their own preconceptions of disability and attempting to implement anti-oppressive methods of education within systems that at times hindered this process. This is not to say that staff musings were without contradiction, with individualised notions of disability surfacing on occasion, especially when considering disabled people other than those they were involved with.

However, a recurring theme in discussions of socially just pedagogy is that contradiction is an inevitable part of learning and debate (Allan, 2004). Furthermore, a 'rhizomatic' approach leads to blurring the teacher/student distinction. Therefore, whilst staff were the 'teachers' on some subjects (explaining the meaning of jargon that might be used by company representatives, for example), young people were challenging and teaching staff alternatives to traditional discourses surrounding disability. Whilst doing this, staff and young people were allies in negotiating and challenging disabling systems. As well as disrupting perceptions of PWLD being 'passive spectators', they were creating tangible change, imagining and carving alternative futures. A critic could rebuke staff for taking the lead in implementing such changes, organising the police training sessions, for example. These arguments, however, rely on perpetuating an ableist drive for independency, rather than celebrating interdependency. They also fail to appreciate the process of education, instead valuing only end-products, a concept that becomes meaningless if advocating the Deleuzoguattarian philosophy of milieu. The criticism could also be made that staff are required to fulfil the agendas of funding bodies, which may clash with the wants and needs of young people. Although at times hampering the extent they can assist young people in achieving their aspirations, the negotiations staff made around what they themselves considered frustrating structural barriers, demonstrated their staunch commitment to their allied young people.

Furthermore, being part of Voice has given young people an arena in which they feel safe to express their opinions; many of whom spoke of feeling more confident to 'speak up' in other areas of their lives. This research concurs with other studies that have shown the positive impact self-advocacy can have on the lives of self-advocates (Goodley 2000; Gilmartin and Slevin 2010). Sentiments expressed by young people involved in the schools projects supplement this, showing that a less formal, hierarchical and structured approach to education, focusing on strengthening relationships, can benefit those who feel "not educated" and "lonely" (Iain, VOYP project) in traditional lessons.

There are undoubtedly issues surrounding government funded and service-based projects which aim to 'empower' disabled people. We should be mindful that target driven agendas demanding measurable results can create structures which perpetuate a wider paternalistic ideology towards PWLD. However, this research has demonstrated one such government-funded project in which dis/abled people are allied in negotiating these barriers and grappling together with new discourses of disability. Whilst staff in the project assisted the young people in making tangible changes within their communities, the young people's involvement was challenging the way staff (and others) thought about disability. Therefore, it is maintained that, although not faultless, projects such as Voice can help to disrupt the stereotype of PWLD being passive spectators and provide us with a glimpse of an alternative, more socially just approach to education.

Works Cited

- Allan, J. (2004). Deterritorializations: Putting postmodernism to work on teacher education and inclusion. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 36*(4), 417-432.
- Allan, J. (2006). The repetition of exclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 10*(2), 121-133.
- Aspis, S. (1997). Self-advocacy for people with learning difficulties: does it have a future? *Disability & Society, 12*(4), 647-654.
- Aspis, S. (2002). Self advocacy: vested interests and misunderstandings. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities, 30*(1), 3-7.
- Atkinson, P., Coffey, A., & Delamont, S. (2003). *Key themes in qualitative research: continuities and changes*. California: Altamira Press.
- Baker, B. (2002). The hunt for disability: The new eugenics and the normalization of school children. *The Teachers College Record, 104*(4), 663-703.
- Barnes, C. (2002). Emancipatory disability research': project or process. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 2*(1), 1-8.
- Buchanan, I. (1997). The problem of the body in Deleuze and Guattari, or, what can a body do? *Body and Society, 3*(3), 73-91.
- Buchanan, I., & Walmsley, J. (2006). Self advocacy in historical perspective. British Journal of Learning Disabilities, 34(3), 133-138.
- Coffey, A., Holbrook, B., & Atkinson, P. (1996). Qualitative Data Analysis: Technologies and Representations. Sociological Research Online, 1(1), http://www.socresonline.org.uk/1/1/4.html.
- Davies, B. (2005). Youth work: a manifesto for our times. *Youth and policy, 88*, 5-28.
- Davis, L. J. (2002). Bending over backwards: Disability, dismodernism, and other difficult positions. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Deal, M. (2007). Aversive disablism: subtle prejudice toward disabled people - Disability & Society. *Disability & Society, 22*(1), 93-107.

- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1972). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (R. Hurley, M. Seem & H. R. Lane, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Department of Health. (2007). Valuing People Now: from progress to transformation - a consultation on the next three years of learning disability policy.
- Erevelles, N. (2000). Educating unruly bodies: Critical pedagogy, disability studies, and the politics of schooling. *Educational theory, 50*(1), 25-47.
- Erevelles, N. (2005). Rewriting Critical Pedagogy from the Periphery: Materiality, Disabliity and the Politics of Schooling. In S. Gabel (Ed.), *Disability Studies in Education: Readings in Theory and Method* (pp. 65-83). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Seabury Press.
- Gabel, S. (2002). Some conceptual problems with critical pedagogy. *Curriculum Inquiry, 32*(2), 177-201.
- Gallagher, D. (2005). Searching for Something Outside Ourselves: The Contradiction Between Technical Rationality and the Achievement of Inclusive Pedagogy. In S. Gabel (Ed.), *Disability Studies in Education* (pp. 139-154). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Gibson, B. (2006). Disability, Connectivity and Transgressing the Autonomous Body. *Journal of Medical Humanities, 27*(3), 187-196.
- Gilmartin, A., & Slevin, E. (2010). Being a member of a self-advocacy group: experiences of intellectually disabled people. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities, 38*(3), 152-159.
- Giroux, H. A. (2003). Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Resistance: Notes on a critical theory of educational struggle. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 35*(1), 5-16.
- Goodley, D. (1998). Supporting people with learning difficulties in self-advocacy groups and models of disability. *Health & Social Care in the Community, 6*(6), 438-446.
- Goodley, D. (2000). Self-advocacy in the Lives of People with Learning Difficulties. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Goodley, D. (2005). Empowerment, self-advocacy and resilience. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities, 9*, 333-343.
- Goodley, D. (2007). Towards socially just pedagogies: Deleuzoguattarian critical disability studies. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 11*(3), 317 - 334.
- Goodley, D. (2009). Bringing the Psyche back into Disability Studies: The Case of the Body with/out Organs. *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies, 3*(3), 257-272.
- Goodley, D., & Moore, M. (2000). Doing Disability Research: Activist lives and the academy. *Disability & Society, 15*(6), 861 - 882.
- Goodley, D., & Roets, G. (2008). The (be)comings and goings of 'developmental disabilities': the cultural politics of 'impairment'. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 29*(2), 239 - 255.
- Hickey-Moody, A., & Wood, D. (2008). *Imagining Otherwise: Deleuze, disability and Second Life*. Paper presented at the ANZCA08 Conference: Power and Place.
- hooks, b. (1994). Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. London: Routledge.
- Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling Society*. London: Harrow Books.

- Llewellyn, P., & Northway, R. (2008). The views and experiences of people with intellectual disabilities concerning advocacy: A focus group study. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities, 12*(3), 213-228.
- Mayo, P. (2003). A Rationale for a Transformative Approach to Education. *Journal of Transformative Education, 1*(1), 38-57.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1999). *Qualitative Data Analysis: an expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Peters, S., Klein, A., & Shadwick, C. (1998). From Our Voices: Special Education and the "Alter-Eagle" Problem. In B. Franklin (Ed.), *When Children Don't Learn: Student Failure and the Culture of Teaching* (pp. 99-115). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Roets, G., Goodley, D., Van Hove, G., & Taylor, S. J. (2007). Narrative in a Nutshell: Sharing Hopes, Fears, and Dreams With Self-Advocates. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 45*(5), 323-334.
- Ryan, S., & Runswick-Cole, K. (2008). Repositioning mothers: mothers, disabled children and disability studies. *Disability & Society, 23*(3), 199 - 210.
- Shildrick, M. (2004). Performativity: Disability after Deleuze. *Scan: Journal of media arts culture, 1*(3), http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=36.
- Shildrick, M. (2009). Dangerous discourses of disability, subjectivity and sexuality. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sutcliffe, J., & Simmons, K. (1993). *Self-advocacy and adults with learning difficulties*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Titchkosky, T. (2010). The Not-Yet-Time of Disability in the Bureaucratization of University Life. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 30*(3/4), http://www.dsq-sds.org/article/view/1295/1331.
- Tregaskis, C. (2004). Constructions of Disability: Researching the interface between disabled and non-disabled people. London: Routledge.
- Ware, L. (2005). Many Possible Futures, Many Different Directions: Merging Critical Special Education and Disability Studies. In S. Gabel (Ed.), *Disability Studies in Education: Readings in Theory and Method* (pp. 103-124). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Endnotes

1. I use the term 'learning difficulty' deliberately in order to remain consistent with the wishes of British self-advocacy organisation, *People First*. They use 'learning difficulty', rather than 'learning disability', to highlight that disability is the creation of society and that learning support needs change over time. They also maintain that by 'people with learning difficulties' they mean 'people that are labelled with learning difficulty'. Again, I adhere to this. The terminology used by Voice is varied; where deviations in language occur it is in direct reference to Voice literature or participant interviews. For stylistic reasons I will not retain inverted commas when referring to 'learning difficulty' and related terms. Nevertheless, these terms should be rendered problematic.

   [Return to Text](#)

2. *Valuing People Now* (Department of Health 2007) is a UK three-year government strategy directing policy and provision for PWLD.