Looking beyond the rhetoric, valuing the mundane: a personal learning curve. Self-advocacy and socially just pedagogy (0189)

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This paper is based upon time spent as a volunteer in a social enterprise providing self-advocacy based projects to young people with the label of 'learning difficulties' in the South Yorkshire area. I will refer to the project as Voice. Voice run three projects:

1. A youth parliament giving elected young people (youth MPs) the chance to represent the views and concerns of their peers to professionals and decision makers.

2. Voices of Young People (VOYP): a project young people can choose to attend in school/college which aims to help them gain confidence, improve their ability to self-advocate and take an active part in decisions that affect them.

3. Moving On: a project offering 'life skills' courses designed by young people with 'learning difficulties' to 16-24 year-olds.

Over an eight week period I spent the majority of my time with the youth MPs and young people involved in the VOYP projects, although I did spend some time with Moving On. This culminated in nine semi-structured interviews with staff and young people involved in the project. I also had the opportunity to record interviews with Youth MPs taking part in a video-project. By mapping my personal learning curve during my time with Voice, and by drawing on data generated from interviews, this paper explores how by focusing on the mundane (Ramcharan, 2005), and locating self-advocacy within discussions socially just pedagogy, projects such as Voice have the potential to offer transformative approaches to education and may contest the positioning of people with 'learning difficulties' as passive spectators.

There has been a plethora of research into self-advocacy since the emergence of the movement. Whilst some have embraced it, sharing positive stories of self-advocates (Goodley, 2000; Gilmartin and Stevin, 2009), others have been more critical, worrying that self-advocacy has become a tokenistic tool for service providers, rather than a form of grassroots activism (Aspis, 2002; Buchanan and Walmsley, 2006). As a government-funded organisation, often basing member criteria on labels imposed by medical and educational institutions, I entered Voice with these concerns at the forefront of my mind. This is reflected in an extract from my research diary after my first day on the project at a youth parliament:

> 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?
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> (Fieldwork Diary, Day 1, Youth Parliament)

At this point in my research, however, I had no real relationship with anyone involved in Voice and only my preconceptions to work upon. I was falling into the trap of placing disabled and non-disabled people in binary opposition to each other (Tregaskis, 2004; Goodley, 2007), viewing staff as distortions to the 'real' voices of the young people and ignoring their potential as allies. Furthermore, I was considering 'tangible' change as the only purposeful outcome of the project. As time passed, and I began to get to know both staff and young people, my perspective changed; my focus shifted to the mundane, everyday interactions and interfaces between those involved (Tregaskis, 2004). My new friends began sharing their stories with me; as diverse between as within the groups I had first separated them into. I realised the importance of looking below the surface of the Voice rhetoric I was originally basing my preconceptions upon. Although creating tangible change was a public aim of the project, the staff took their user-led ethos seriously and 'revolution' was not always the top of the young peoples' agendas.

This led me to consider Voice more widely within educational discourse. Critical disability scholars argue that, whilst transformative approaches to education have been considered socially just alternatives to traditional structures, such debate has failed to address issues of disability (Goodley and Roets, 2008). Instead, discussions of 'special educational needs' (SEN), 'children with SEN' and 'inclusion' have often portrayed disabled learners as problematic 'others' to be tolerated and managed (Allan, 2004). Those engaged in recent discussion of socially just pedagogy have argued for a poststructuralist approach to education which can include the experiences of the most marginalised (Allan, 2004; Erevelles, 2000, 2005; Goodley, 2007; Goodley and Roets, 2008). In line with these arguments, in this paper I consider the non-hierarchical structure of a rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972; 1987) to illustrate a potential classroom environment which is no longer a place of dictation stratification but a space to foster networks and relationships, and an arena in which to grapple with ideas and experiences. The concept of the rhizome removes the focus on the independent citizen and replaces it with an acceptance of reliance and interdependency; binary distinctions of 'good and bad', 'right and wrong' are questioned; and knowledge is recognised as constructed, dynamic and contradictory (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972; 1987). Crucially, the emphasis of education shifts from celebrating achievement to valuing difference (Goodley, 2007).

This concept was pertinent to the four key themes that emerged at the end of my research:

1. The importance of peer support

2. Staff attempts to balance power

3. Young people's increased confidence to question

4. Staff contradiction: struggling to take new concepts of disability beyond the workplace

To conclude, there are undoubtedly issues surrounding government funded and service-based projects which aim to 'empower' disabled people (Goodley, 2005): target driven agendas demanding measurable results and structures which perpetuate a wider paternalistic ideology towards people with learning difficulties create potentially difficult situations. However, it is when considering mundane interactions that the value and importance of such projects to the individuals involved become apparent. Voice demonstrates an example of disabled and non-disabled people allied in negotiating barriers and grappling together with new discourses of disability. Whilst staff in the project assist the young people in some areas, young people continually challenge and teach alternatives to any patronising, paternalistic and ultimately disabling preconceptions. Therefore, I would maintain that, although problematic, projects such as Voice can help to disrupt passive stereotypes of people with learning difficulties and provide us with a glimpse of an alternative, more socially just approach to education.

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