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'Students don't always tell teachers the truth very often, do they?' Reflections on the implications when teachers and students collaborate to investigate teaching practice

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Informed by Martin Buber's notions of *I-It* and *I-Thou* relationships, this paper examines the problematic and contested issues of emancipation and empowerment in schooling. Specifically, it explores what happens when teachers and students collaborate when observing lessons and commenting on teaching practice in the imagined space of the self-improving school system. Within this space, it examines the challenges and complexities of establishing *I-Thou* teacher–student relationships, and the potential for creative dissonance in such situations. Finally, it explores the idea that the self-improving school could become a place where teachers and students create a space for mutual dialogue about collaborative research in the classroom – in other words, a place where classroom practice is democratically 'top-down' teacher-led and 'bottom-up' student-informed.

Keywords: self-improving school systems; practitioner research; teacher–student relationships; Martin Buber

Introduction

However disguised the UK government's policies for educational reform may appear, they are about the first creed of universal market fundamentalism, and the belief that competition between schools will raise overall levels of pupil achievement and drive up standards in education (Ball, 2013; Clarke, 2012; Hurley, 2013; Sammons, 2008). The use of 'drive up' is meant to show that competition to improve quality in education is an irresistible natural force that requires schools to continuously self-improve. The restless search for improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, supported by effective self-evaluation of teaching practice and the tracking of student learning outcomes, is said to be the hallmark of school effectiveness (Demetrious and Kyriakides, 2012: 150). Moreover, much of the school improvement literature has its roots in managerial literature, which often promotes the contested idea that, so long as 'top-down' and 'proven' recipe-driven approaches are used, change – resulting in the measured improvement in teaching practice and student learning outcomes – can be managed in an orderly way (Bolam *et al*., 2005; Ferguson, 2013; Owen, 2014). It follows that there is no shortage of policies for improving schooling.

Questioning the cost effectiveness of the outgoing Labour Government's education policies, the incoming Coalition Government in 2010 embarked on a programme of giving schools the responsibility for their improvement. Modelled on practice in teaching hospitals, schools awarded

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teaching school and academy status are required to form strategic alliances with other schools and institutions of higher education. It is imagined the creation of these self-improving school systems will allow expertise in governance, leadership, and pedagogy to be more effectively developed and shared between schools and institutions of higher education. However, so far, there is no firm evidence to suggest schools are keen to join other schools in clustered partnership, particularly when it involves the pairing of perceived under-achieving schools with successful lead schools. Nor is there firm evidence to suggest that collaborative school partnerships will deliver long-term systemic school improvement, or reduce inequality in education (Coe, 2009; Greany, 2014; Hargreaves, 2014).

In contrast to this top-down perspective on reform within education, an alternative debate about school self-improvement adopts a more 'bottom-up' approach, taking as its starting point the idea that unless teachers adopt an active stance, and take charge of their own professional development, change will remain superficial. Laurence Stenhouse (1983) is credited with promoting the idea of the teacher as researcher. Reflecting the views of Freire (1996; 2013) and Illich (1995), Stenhouse's prime concern was the emancipation, or liberation, of students, teachers, and educational establishments from knowledge and practices prescribed by others. He argued that they all should be empowered to critically examine prescribed knowledge and practices, and to discover, and own, forms of knowledge and ways of working for themselves. More recently, other writers have carried forward the argument for the democratizing of research processes in schools (for example, Colucci-Gray, *et al*., 2013; Frost and Durrant, 2003; Wilkins, 2011).

Acknowledging the bottom-up approach advocated by Stenhouse, and with its roots in the more recent literature about the learning organization and professional learning communities (Bolam *et al*., 2005; Hargreaves, 2007; Stoll *et al*., 2006: 229; Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007; Wenger, 1998), the self-improving school is portrayed as a place where teachers set out to 'overcome the shortcomings associated with episodic, decontextualised professional development conducted in isolation from practice' (Webster-Wright, 2009, cited in Watson, 2014: 18). These shortcomings are said to be overcome when the school is research-engaged (MacGilchrist, *et al*., 1997; Sharp *et al*., 2005; Wilkins, 2011), or a place where teachers learn to 'share and critically interrogate their practice in an on-going, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-orientated, growth-promoting way' (Bolam *et al*., 2005, cited in Watson, 2014: 18; Colucci-Gray, *et al*., 2013). Acknowledging this, the report of the BERA–RSA Inquiry into the Role of Research in Teacher Education makes the case for 'the development, across the UK, of self-improving education systems in which teachers are research literate and have opportunities for engagement in research and enquiry' (BERA–RSA, 2014).

Of course, the bottom-up, research-informed approach to school improvement can be a problematic and contested journey – particularly when teachers and schools are so empowered to critically examine prescribed knowledge and practices, and so on, as described by Stenhouse above. Watson (2014: 19, citing Clegg *et al*., 2005) reminds us that 'learning – precisely because it has the potential to introduce disequilibrium – gives rise to disorder'. This is particularly so when the socially constructed and hierarchical positioning of teachers and students in the classroom is open to challenge. In the pupil voice discourse, it is argued that young people have a genuine, legitimate right to be heard on matters they consider important, and that ways of engaging them as important 'influencers' of policy and decision-making in schools needs to be considered (DfES, 2004; Ferguson *et al*., 2011; Fielding, 2007; Guajardo *et al*., 2006; O'Boyle, 2013; Rudduck *et al*., 1996; Tetler and Baltzer, 2011). Critically, these scholars argue that listening to the views of students is a powerful antecedent for future change in practitioner and organizational practice, and not just a means to raising levels of achievement (Klein, 2003; Macbeath, 2006).

On the other hand, critics argue that student voice is usually predicated on maintaining a power relationship in which privilege is assigned to the adult's rather than the student's authentic voice (Cruddas, 2007; Stern, 2007; Stern, 2013; Thomson and Gunter, 2006). It is claimed adults prescribe the space in which:

> [w]hat is sayable, and crucially, what is *heard*, are circumscribed by teachers and hence 'pupil voice' becomes a means by which pupils may be effectively silenced within schools.
>
> (Watson, 2014: 26)

Developing this theme, various writers argue that the voices of children are frequently constrained and located within positivist-inspired interventions for achieving school improvement, improving student behaviour, and promoting their social and emotional development (Arnot and Reay, 2007; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Elwood, 2013; Gillies, 2011; Leach and Lewis, 2013; O'Brien and Moules, 2007; Watson, 2014). Consequently, a context is created in which the child is perceived and treated as an *It* rather than a *Thou* (Buber, 1947). Informed by Martin Buber's best-known work, *I and Thou* (*Ich and Du*), this paper examines the dynamic nature of the school improvement journey, when it involves the problematic and contested emancipation and empowerment of teachers and students as research partners in the classroom. The paper explores the potential for creative dissonance within the classroom, and across the school, when research into teaching and learning is a collaborative venture, when it is 'done with', rather 'than on', students, and when their authentic views are sought, listened to, and heard.

Martin Buber's philosophy of education

Returning to the opposing arguments for top-down and bottom-up approaches in education, it is interesting to recall why Martin Buber rejects the idea of an either/or situation between the two approaches. In his writings, Buber recognizes the need for top-down teacher-led as well as bottom-up student-informed practice in the classroom. He examines our capacity to experience the world in terms of two basic forms of relationships – the *I-Thou* and *I-It* relationships. Using the analogy of the sculptor and the gardener, Buber (1947) outlines two basic *I-It* forms of education.[1] The first form models the teacher as the gardener, who creates and tends the environment to allow the student's innate abilities to blossom; whereas, the sculptor model imagines the teacher's shaping of the student's raw capacities into an imagined finished outcome. However, because we understand things in objective as well as subjective ways, Buber contrasts the *I-It* way of knowing with *I-Thou* knowledge. In the *I-Thou* relationship, stress is placed on the mutual existence of two beings – an encounter of equals who recognize and are in mutual dialogue with one another (ibid.). When describing this relationship, 'words such as dialogue, meeting, encounter, mutuality and exchange are frequently used' (Guilherme and Morgan, 2009: 567). The *I-Thou* inter-human relationship is about mutuality, where our *I* perspective is ontologically open to, and recognizes, the *Thou* of others as independent of our *I* pre-judgement (Olsen, 2004: 17, cited in Guilherme and Morgan, 2009: 567). In contrast to the ontological openness of the *I-Thou* relationship, in the *I-It* inter-human relationship there is a notable absence of dialogue. Rather than being recognized as an equal, the other being is objectified as a resource to be manipulated (Guilherme and Morgan, 2009: 567).

Buber's observations about relationships have significant implications for the way we view education and educational practice. For Buber, the teacher can only educate when there is authentic dialogue with students, based on mutual trust and respect, and when the views, needs, capacities, and interests of the student and the teacher, and the prescribed role of the teacher, are recognized and accepted in the dialogic relationship. This is said to happen when the teacher

perceives and begins to understand things from the student's perspective without losing control of their perspective as teacher, and when the student agrees to accept the teacher's guidance (Guilherme and Morgan, 2009: 569). In other words, Buber understands that both the *I-Thou* and the *I-It* relationships are constituent elements in one's education; it is impossible to have one without the other. He also recognizes the natural tendency for the *I-Thou* relationship to naturally slip into an objective or instrumental *I-It* relationship, and the potential for the *I-It* relationship to become a subjective or spiritual *I-Thou* relationship (ibid.: 567). Consequently, he rejects the idea of an either/or situation between the teacher-led top-down and a student-centred bottom-up approach in education (Buber, 1925). When too much emphasis is placed on the instrumental role of the teacher as the expert provider of facts and information, the teacher and the student can easily find they are caught up in an *I-It* relationship. On the other hand, when too much emphasis is placed on the role of the student as an independent learner, it is difficult for the *I-Thou* relationship to emerge because of the implied absence of input and guidance from the teacher (Guilherme and Morgan, 2009: 568). Consequently, communication and dialogue are key terms in Buber's philosophy of education.

Given the importance of dialogue, community, and mutuality in Buber's philosophy, it has challenging implications for historically dominant, hierarchical *I-It* informed conceptualizations of teacher–student relationships. Although one might hope that teachers and students will be empowered and allowed to explore ways of working together that are informed by *I-It* and *I-Thou* relationship thinking, practice in schools today, as in the past, is often dominated by *I-It* thinking. When a school is deemed to be failing, in danger of failing, or at risk of losing its 'outstanding' school status, the enforced concerns of leadership are typically short-term. Prescribed *I-It* strategies, which typify intervention and the 'turnaround' of schools, include a preference for the top-down imposition of 'proven' managerial-led solutions to deliver improvements in teaching practice and student learning; strategies that usually say to the student, 'we know what is best for you, your job is to listen and do as you're told' (Wilkins, 2011: 132). When recognizing that they are trapped in this position, the challenge for schools is to discover ways of moving towards a situation where pedagogy is top-down teacher-led and bottom-up student-informed. This requires the creation of new forms of teacher–student social relationships in the classroom.

In social theory, the concept of 'third space' is used when exploring social relationships. The concept's origins can be traced back to Bhabha's (1994: 2) notion of the 'in-between spaces' that are seen to exist between binary descriptors of difference; for example, *I-It* relational positioning of teachers as the source of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, and students as 'in-need' beneficiaries of prescribed programmes of teaching and therapeutic education (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). In contrast, the concept of working in 'in-between spaces' is used when exploring alternative *I-Thou* informed ways of teaching writing (Ryan and Barton, 2013: 71) and elementary mathematics (Flessner, 2009), and when working at the boundaries of established professional activity and expertise to support vulnerable young people and families (Edwards *et al*., 2010). Significantly, according to Whitchurch (2013: 21), these in-between spaces 'are likely to be invisible in that they are not written into organisational charts or job descriptions' – and working in them can be a troublesome experience for teachers and students (Edwards *et al*., 2010).

Research *with* students about teaching practice

Acknowledging a moral commitment to the empowering purpose of education, this paper examines the implications for the participants when lesson observation systems allow and empower students to observe teachers and to offer feedback on their teaching practice. It considers whether eliciting and listening to the voices of students about teacher practice could

have a positive impact upon the performance of both students and their teachers. It also explores the need to listen to, and value, 'teacher voice', and examines how increased student voice can lead to further and, perhaps, unexpected developments in the way power is distributed and used in the classroom.

Participants in the study were: one of the authors, who is a senior member of staff in the school; a teaching colleague; the teacher's critical friend; and four year 10 student observers. Acknowledging their different positions in the school and potential relational tensions in the study is important. None of the participants can claim impartiality in the study. The author had line-management responsibility for his teaching colleague; he was also the students' English teacher and trained them in lesson observations, which involved them observing and giving him feedback on two of his lessons. In addition, he had worked with the students and the teacher to help prepare them for the planned observations of two separate lessons taught over a period of three months by the teacher; these were observed by the author, the students, and the teacher's critical friend. Around the lesson observations, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher, the student observers, and the critical friend; and some creative vignettes were written by the students with the intention of providing a different perspective upon the events.

Ethical considerations

When inviting his colleague to participate in the research project, the author was acutely aware of the implications the change could have for her: the potential erosion of the traditionally defined power balance between student and teacher; the vulnerability of opening herself up to explicit criticism of her teaching and classroom practice; whether the trust necessary to ensure confidentiality would be observed by the student participants; and, finally, the risk of being accused by colleagues of allowing senior management to introduce student-led observations. One conscious decision was not to rush the teacher; to allow her time for reflection, freedom to withdraw from the process, and to seek clarification when necessary. Steps were also taken to ensure the teacher was comfortable with the selection of students who would observe her teach. The students were informed as to the teacher involved and given a chance to express any concerns they may have had.

Before the research began, permission was sought and received from the school leadership team and governors to conduct the study and to involve a sample of students. Written consent was obtained from each student, and from their parents or guardians, and it was also explained to each student that they should not feel compelled to take part in the study, and could withdraw at any time. An assurance of participant confidentiality was provided at the outset with the unlikely proviso that, should anything be shared which indicated a student was in a potentially harmful situation, the necessary action would be taken to safeguard them. The students were also given outlines of the objectives of the interviews, in order to reduce any potential teacher/researcher and student inequality, and to allow them time to develop their thoughts and ideas on the subjects to be discussed.

I-Thou relationships in the classroom

Considering the aims of the study, it is instructive to see how it illustrates the complexities of establishing *I-Thou* teacher–student relationships in the classroom, and particularly when the participants' actions cause them to create and occupy a contested space for research that is 'in-between' their traditional roles of teacher and student. The interviews conducted before the first

lesson observation revealed three main themes: the participants' early feelings of anxiety over the uncertainty of what was to come; their anxieties over the implications of giving and receiving feedback; and a shared sense of excitement when contemplating the challenging 'newness' of the situation:

> Right now I'm wondering why I umm volunteered [pause] only joking! It's just a strange feeling that I'm allowing students to step over a, over a [long pause] line that's been drawn in the sand for a long time. A big part of me wants to give it a go and inside me I know it's the right thing to do, but it feels like when I was a child scared to look under the bed but I knew I had to.
>
> (Participating teacher)

The start of this answer, as well as the use of the simile comparing present emotions to childhood anxieties, is interesting to note, but particularly striking is the imagery of 'the line in the sand' as a metaphor for the barrier the teacher feels she is about to cross. This theme is developed in the students' responses as well, and shows how, for them, there are feelings of trepidation about crossing a 'line':

> I'm really looking forward to seeing a lesson from a new point of view, and I know what I'm looking for but [long pause] the idea of sitting in front of a teacher, even a nice one like [pause] and telling her what I really think of her teaching – well it just feels a bit weird; like I'm doing something I'm not meant to.
>
> (Student 1)

> What if the lesson goes really wrong? I want to be positive but I've also got to tell the truth. If this means anything it must be truthful mustn't it? Students don't tell teachers the truth very often, do they?
>
> (Student 2)

Admitting that 'students don't tell teachers the truth very often, do they?' is informative. It shows awareness of the power-related reasons why students might feel they have, or need, to tell teachers what they want to hear. Meanwhile, the second student's use of the phrase 'if this means anything' echoes concerns expressed within the literature about the dangers of 'tokenism' when allowing students a voice (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). Perhaps the student is expressing a hope that the observations will bring change – while, at the same time, expressing a fear that this will not be allowed to happen.

Before the first lesson observation, the students were asked to write a creative vignette focusing on their emerging understanding about the changing power dynamics within the research situation. The following are excerpts from two vignettes, the notable quality of which reflects the work the students did in English lessons with the author when learning to write and use vignettes:

> They were repulsed? By whom? Him? A trickle of sweat slithered down his spine and perspiration appeared to have collected on his forehead, he looked at his notes again, he could turn this around he suggested disingenuously to himself. The words once so clear and ordered were now swimming in front of him. His tongue had caught in his mouth and he just stared hollowly at the writhing ocean of angry faces, their cancerous whispers hissed at him until transformed into vindictive shouts that were viciously spat at him from the now convulsing crowd. His grasp on the once pathetic yet admiring crowd had vanished, wrenched from his hands and he was left with nothing. The power no longer his, he turned and walked off stage…
>
> (Excerpt from the first student's vignette)

> The fog swirled around the woman. Condensation clung to the thin white dress and the fingers of the cold weather plucked at her bare skin. Memories of warm fires in cosy living rooms, servants

> so easily summoned and tables groaning with food danced before her tired eyes. She was lost and alone in a world she could no longer comprehend.
>
> (Excerpt from the second student's vignette)

In both vignettes, the students recognize the potential vulnerability of the teacher, and demonstrate a powerful degree of empathy which represents a strong basis for *I-Thou* relationship building between teacher and students. The first student's writing illustrates the fragility of power and the transience between appearing to be in total control and then a figure of contempt, when a line between being teacher and a student is crossed. Meanwhile, the second student creates a woman whose affluent existence ends, leaving her vulnerable and in imminent danger. This raises some fascinating questions, such as: As well as writing about the perceived thoughts and feelings of the teacher, is the student exploring her own feelings of anxiety and vulnerability in this new situation? Is a teacher's identity completely bound up in the cloak of power that society bestows upon them? Would allowing students to question that authority be as troublesome as the vignettes suggest? Meanwhile, at one point during the interview discussions, and revealing the sense in which teachers and students are separated by a gulf, one of the students is at pains to point out that she holds no feelings of contempt for this teacher; but that some teachers – whom she perceives to be incompetent or wilfully vindictive – certainly do provoke such negative feelings in her and other students. As the student succinctly puts it when the researcher expressed surprise at the depth of her feelings: 'Well you wouldn't know would you Sir? I bet you've never asked the question before.'

Discussion

The self-improving school system: Whose agenda, whose agency?

To understand how collaborative partnerships of schools might evolve into the imagined self-improving school systems, the dynamics of collaborative partnership will need to be examined in more detail. The journey towards school self-improvement will involve more than just identifying and sharing 'good practice' in, and between, schools. Improving schooling involves such matters as the school climate and culture, and the nature and quality of relationships between members of the organization (Demetrious and Kyriakides, 2012; Van Houtte and Van Maele, 2011). Collaboration and dialogue between teachers, and teachers and students, as well as creative innovation and professional reflection, are key elements in the model for change. In particular, this paper raises the question as to what extent students should contribute to discussions about school improvement. 'Student voice' needs to be defined as more than consultation; otherwise, what is said by students, listened to and heard will all too easily be circumscribed by teachers – and 'student voice' will be effectively silenced in schools (Watson, 2014: 26).

Acknowledging this, the study's power and impact is evident in the way it reveals the depth and entrenchment of *I-It* relationships in normal schooling, and in policy-driven strategies for school improvement. It suggests that there can be no real and lasting improvement in standards of teaching and learning until this *I-It* norm is addressed. Appreciating and addressing this concern in schools will not be easy, especially when it requires the questioning of the traditional agential and power-related positioning of teacher–student relationships and role identities in the classroom, and across the school. Recognizing this, the study reveals the dynamic, troublesome, and potentially disruptive nature of the school improvement journey – particularly when the strategies used to bring about improvements in teaching and learning cause teachers and students to become ontologically open to each other's *I-It* and *I-Thou* perspectives. Perhaps only then can

they truly begin to move towards a situation where classroom practice is democratically top-down teacher-led and bottom-up student-informed (Buber, 1925).

To begin to realize this possibility, the participants in the study can be seen to ever so tentatively move towards, and to create and occupy, a space in-between the traditional hierarchical relational and agential boundaries of being a teacher and a student; that is, a 'third' space in which they can engage in mutual respectful dialogue and reflection, experience a sense of community, create a shared educational practice, and, in so doing, experience the problematic reality of building and maintaining *I-Thou* relationships. Creating this kind of mutual learning environment is seen to be both troublesome and an emancipatory experience for the participants. Working in the openness of third spaces is said to allow for the emergence of 'creative combinations and the restructuring of oppositional ideas and thinking'. It is said to require communication and dialogue between people, resulting in 'joint and individual sense-making' (Martin *et al*., 2011: 300). Third spaces are also said to be 'sites of struggle, a relational effect' (Law, 1992: 4, cited in Whitchurch, 2013: 21); places in which participants experience the 'on-going tension that is essential to critical engagement' with one another (Whitchurch, 2013: 23). The idea of the third space being 'a site of struggle, a relational effect', resulting in what Buber describes as the shock of truth (1999: 4, cited in Stern, 2013: 4), is evident when the participants recognize and voice their feelings of transgression and vulnerability – hence resulting in statements such as 'doing something I'm not meant to do'; 'crossing a line in the sand', which one is not supposed to transgress; and 'students don't always tell teachers the truth very often, do they?' On the other hand, despite revealing their sense of vulnerability, the journey the participants take is also seen to be potentially emancipatory and empowering for them. Their emerging ontological openness to one another's *I-Thou* relationship – and an acceptance of individual responsibility, personal agency, and the moral purpose of what they are doing – are said to be the key drivers of educational change (Fullan, 1991; Fullan, 1993).

As mentioned earlier, critics of the top-down approach to change in education have long argued the case for empowering teachers to critically examine prescribed knowledge and practices, and to discover, and own, forms of knowledge and ways of working for themselves. Considering the study's wider implications, it draws attention to the idea that, in the self-improving school system, teachers and students are encouraged and empowered to create a space for mutual dialogue about the possibilities for collaborative research in the classroom. This requires an environment where research about teaching and learning is a collaborative teacher–student venture; and it requires schools where classroom practice is democratically top-down teacher-guided and bottom-up student-informed.

Notes

1. Buber's paper is translated as 'Education' in his classic work *Between Man and Man* (1947). It was an address to the Third International Educational Conference, Heidelberg, August 1925.

Notes on the contributors

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Andy Crisp has been Head of English, Assistant Head, and Deputy Head at several North Yorkshire schools. He completed an MA in Educational Improvement in 2011, focusing his research upon the benefits of

effective student voice. In his day-to-day work with other teachers, Andy stresses the importance of being a reflective practitioner and emphasizes the need to keep learning, no matter what career stage a colleague might be at.

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